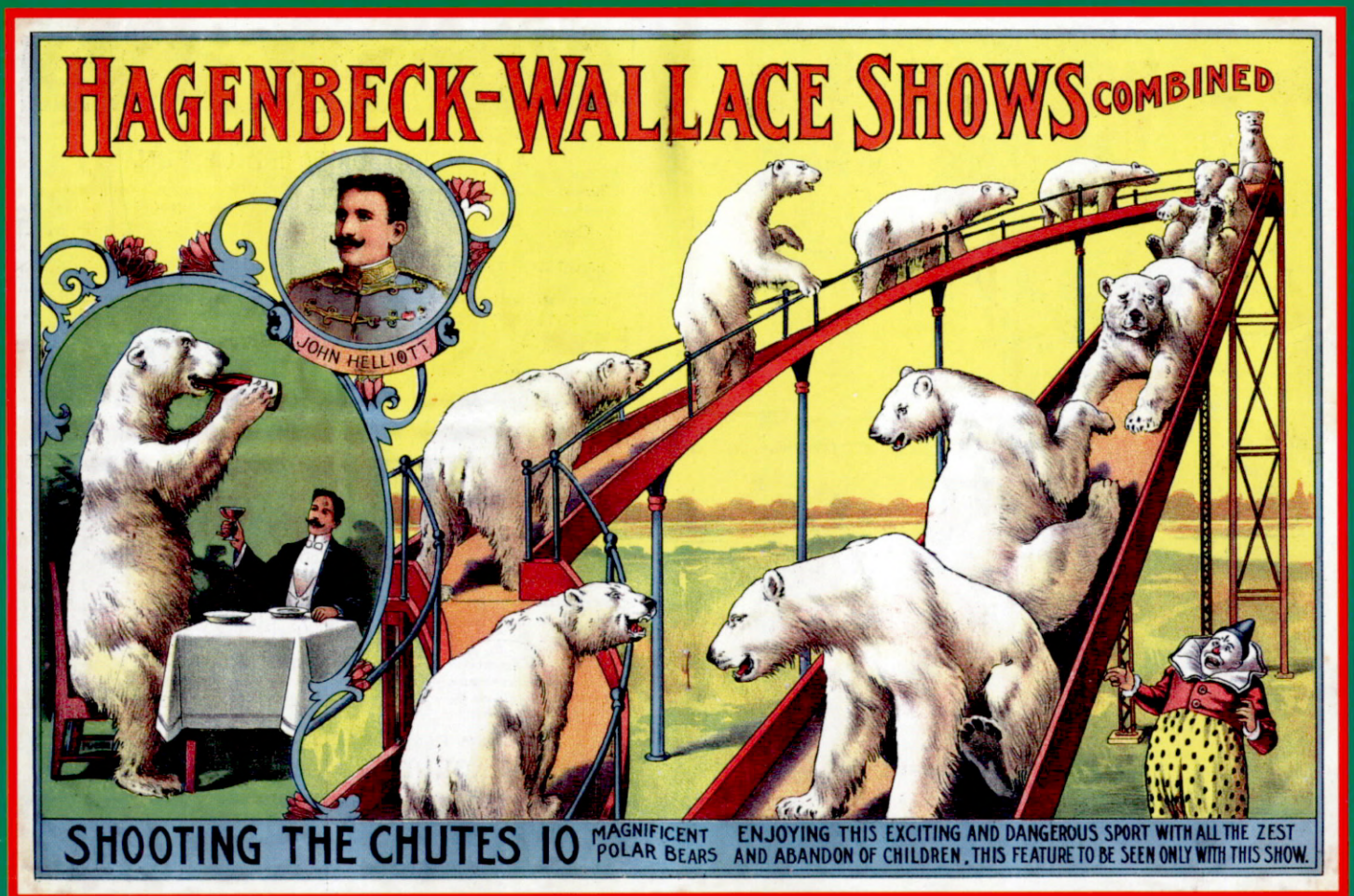


Bandwagon

THE JOURNAL OF THE CIRCUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC.

JULY-AUGUST 2008



BANDWAGON

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EDITOR AND PUBLISHER

Fred D. Pfening III, Managing Editor

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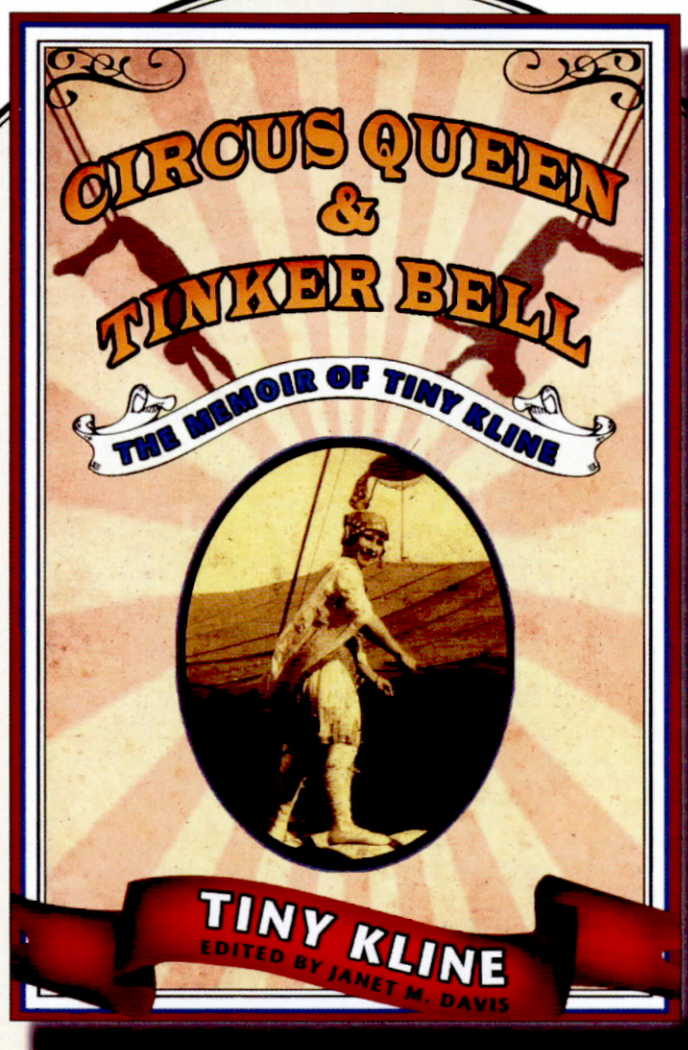
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On The Road With The Big Show In 1953-1954

By Bill Taggart

SUMMER OF 1953: SEASON ENDS

Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows continued playing city after city on its 1953 tour without me. Many of my friends, especially Doc Higgins and Elsie Jung stayed on the show as it traveled along the "sawdust trail." In the middle of August Franz Roberts left his ushering job to return to the University of North Carolina and Mrs. Higgins and Suzanne left in Los Angeles for Sarasota so Suzanne could enroll in third grade.

July 23-26, Chicago, Illinois. The show played to excellent business and circus folks had a few nights in which to visit the windy city's nightclubs, theaters and restaurants. The old Chez Paree night club always had top acts appearing such as Jimmy Durante, Martha Raye, Sophie Tucker, Martin and Lewis, Ted Lewis and Joey E. Lewis. Circus folks liked to catch these acts, see the latest movies, and in Chicago go to the Showman's League, whose first president was Buffalo Bill. Roberts wrote me that he was happy when they finally left town so that he could catch up on some sleep and save more money for college.

Doc Higgins wrote to tell me that the Clydesdale team, pulling the Merry-Go-Around float in spec, became frightened one afternoon and veered into the center ring, hitting a performer who was making spec. Fortunately no one was seriously injured.

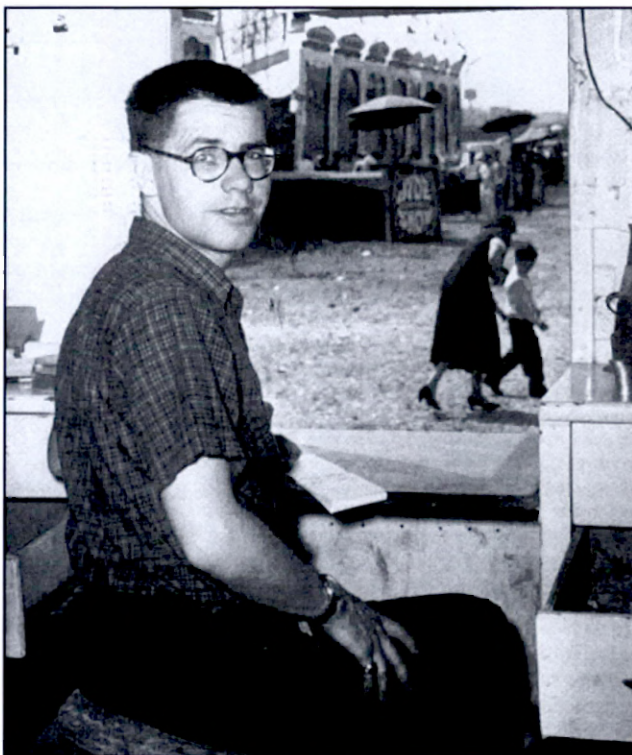
August 1, Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Doc Higgins had this to say in a letter, "A cloud burst during the matinee turned the backyard into a regular sea of mud and water

and everyone had to don rain gear, especially high rubber boots, to continue working. The lot stayed muddy until we pulled out even though the sun came out. After a few weeks of slow business we are having better houses."

August 13, Grand Forks, North Dakota. Roberts writes, "We have recently been having cold and wet days but today, finally, it is sunny. Business has been good but we 'blew' Brainerd, Minnesota, because of a soft lot." He also told me that he had won a bank roll for school playing craps one night at the train in a little game that "Chicken Charlie" the black car porter had organized. It was a real floating crap game.

August 17-18. From Bismarck to

Bill Taggart in the yellow ticket wagon on Ringling-Barnum. John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, photo collection.



Jamestown, North Dakota, the long silver circus train hauled the circus two hundred and sixty eight miles; however, the afternoon performance at Jamestown started promptly at one-thirty p.m. The old show could still do it.

The show continued to jump here and there across the western plain states and then it landed on the west coast where it toured from Oregon to Southern California. The outstanding spot was the Cow Palace in San Francisco. This indoor date, the first since the Boston Garden, "was a piece of cake," according to Elsie Jung. Elsie said that all the young German performers were now all decked out in cowboy hats, shirts, pants, and boots and that they looked great. "One would think that we were on the Hundred and One Ranch," wrote Doc Higgins.

October 5, San Bernardino, California. As the circus train pulled out of the yards that night, the show started the long haul back to Sarasota but with lots of performances in large and small cities along the way. Elsie wrote, "I always enjoy the Southern route with all the colorful western and southern towns, especially San Antonio and New Orleans."

October 11 Albuquerque, New Mexico. Elsie wrote, "After visiting thousands of friends of mine on the West Coast, I am just not settling down to the usual rut." Like all letters from circus people, she had a word to say about the lots. "We've had the dirtiest lots you can imagine ever since San Francisco. All are soft, fine powdery dust; sure could use some good old

Wisconsin mud." And yes, she included in her letter a note about old Greyhound, "He had a quarter cut in Frisco on both front feet and was out of the show for several days. He has been as mean as ever since then, just a spoiled trooper."

By now, the once blue big top was more brown than blue with some rather large pin holes in the canvas. The floats were in need of paint, and the circus folks were tired. Weather conditions were also becoming unpleasant.

October 27, Waco, Texas. Doc Higgins had this account; "Yesterday we blew the show on account of the mud. We had rain the night before. Today the lot was almost as bad. It took a long time to get the top up and the seat wagons took two and three 'cats' to spot each of them. The show spent a young fortune on straw, sand, and gravel. I'll kick Night Rider, Flash, and Diamond for you. In the meantime, Bill, please write."

October 31, Corpus Christi, Texas. Between matinee and night performance a small troupe of circus folks went to Memorial Hospital to visit Billy White, a polio patient. Clowns Felix Adler, Paul Jung, Frankie Saluto, and Dick Anderson, the tra- peze catcher, were there. His

Willis Lawson



Doc Higgins, left, and Doc Henderson. All illustrations are from the Pfening Archives unless otherwise credited.

grandfather, the owner of the lot on which the circus played, had it written into the contract that his grandfather would have circus visitors.

In the "Dressing Room Gossip" column of the November 21, 1953 *Billboard* Mary Jane Miller wrote, "The tour thru the South is giving us cold nights. We had rain in New Orleans and our last show, Sunday night was canceled." Even a casual reader could tell that the circus was now racing to escape the fall weather.

November 20, Miami, Florida. The big top was hoisted into the air for a three day stand and on November 22 "The 1953 Edition of the Greatest Show on Earth" came to a close as Merle Evans and the circus band played *Auld Lang Syne*. As the notes faded away one could hear the sound of the last teardown for the season. The soiled wardrobe was packed

away, familiar floats were covered and hauled to the rain, and in the Ring Stock Department saddles and bridles were loaded into the pad wagon under the watchful eye of old Ralph. Within three hours fourteen hundred performers, twenty-six bulls, and eight-six horses and an ark full of wild animals were ready to return to Sarasota, the home they had left eight long months ago.

Doc Higgins wrote from Sarasota, "Night Rider, Flash, and Diamond are happy to be back at the winter quarters stables and that everyone is looking forward to a few weeks of rest before thinking of 1954 rehearsals." For me, the 1953 season will never end. The "big one", with all my friends, human and equine, will always be out there day after day working, performing, traveling and making "Children of all Ages" happy, if even for a few hours. I know it is out there, I can close my eyes and see it, hear the music, sounds, applause and I'll always be there to take care of my Night Rider, Flash, and Diamond. My summer of 1953 will never end; I won't let it end, in my mind the red wagons are still rolling.

LAWSON MAKES ME A TICKET SELLER

Willis Lawson walked up to the main entrance marquee and told my boss Rudy Bundy that he would like to see me at the yellow wagon between shows. Rudy told me to meet Lawson at the yellow wagon after the matinee. When I heard this is I wondered what was in store for me.

When I went to the yellow wagon, I was greeted by Irma Meyer, who was Lawson's secretary and sister of Frieda Pushnik, the armless and legless lady who was a major side show attraction. She hinted that Lawson had some good news for me and shortly he stepped into the office section of the ticket wagon. I can still see him in his Tatrerstall shirt, open



Side show banner for Frieda Pushnik, the armless and legless lady.

collar, brown slacks, and well polished Wellington boots. Lawson was the model for the Charlton Hesston role in *The Greatest Show on Earth*.

He smiled and said, "Bill tonight I am moving you from the Front Door to the Ticket Seller position in the menagerie. Go to the silver wagon and get a bankroll from Theo Forestall and meet Bill McGough, the head ticket seller, in the front end blues about six thirty. He will have tickets for you and explain the details to you, okay." I thanked him and bid Rudy and the front door crew goodbye.

I knew that I would be selling high back reserved tickets during the come in while standing on a ticket box in the menagerie. As a new ticket seller I would also be working in front of the big top after the main entrance marquee was torn down. There I could sell tickets to stragglers, or lot lice as we all called them, if they wanted to see the rest of the show. With a little persuasion one could always pick up a few bucks from those standing around.

I was thrilled that I was becoming a ticket seller as those positions were hard to come by on the Ringling show or any other circus for that matter. Before six thirty I climbed the stairs at the rear of the silver wagon and was greeted by Bobby DeLochte, assistant treasurer, and Theo Forestall, the treasurer. Both of these men were highly respected on the show. Bobby had been with American

Circus Corporation shows for many years, Sells-Floto, and Cole Brothers. Theo had once been assistant treasurer. The first thing Bobby told me was to keep my bills organized, faced, and pressed hard so that I would have a correct count. Both men had a dry sense of humor and sometime you could not tell if they were serious or kidding. Bobby gave me a bank roll of \$50 dollars and \$10 dollars of quarters, a ticket sales pad with opening and closing numbers on the tickets, and a bank bag with my name on it for turning in my sales receipts. Lastly I was given a ticket sellers box of oak that opened like a lunch box where I could keep my tickets, bills and change. The box could be opened and closed quickly and you could carry it with its leather handle.

The ticket sellers were a close knit group who kept to themselves most of the time. They even all lived in one section of the ushers car and were noted for their neatness. It was rumored that they made good money selling tickets and that some of it was not exactly legit. There was the Sheik out of New York, Tommy Realer from New Jersey, Smiling Joe Bainbridge from Miami, and the Madden brothers of New York. All of these men were also stage hands in New York and in the winter worked many legit shows. The head ticket seller was Bill McGough from Texas. He was a veteran of Hagenbeck-Wallace, and the 101 Ranch show.

The inside ticket sellers were positioned at ticket boxes around the hippodrome track and people who were not happy with their bleacher seats at each end of the huge tent were encouraged by the ushers to go to a ticket seller and pay extra for a seat in one of the side sections where there were comfortable high back chairs. This was done on the come in

while the show organist was playing happy music to keep customers in good spirits.

That night I had my ticket box placed at the entrance from the menagerie to the big top seating where potential customers could see the comfortable high back seats I was selling. I was not shy at pitching seats to the people who walked by my box. I repeated and repeated "I've got high back seats for the two hour circus. You can't enjoy the show unless you have a comfortable high back chair seat." I would point to a section where I had good seats and before long I was selling row after row of good seats. I would tear off the stubs for the customers and point to a section where they were to be seated. The come in was an exciting time as the customers were anxious, and the sellers were working the crowd hard as well. So were all the candy butchers who were selling peanuts and popcorn early in the show. They would work the crowd and get them good and thirsty before bringing on the ice cold Coca Cola.



The main entrance to the big show.

When it was time for the show to begin we would have our tickets boxes sloughed and go through the connection and meet our boss Bill McGough under one of the seat wagons. We would account for our sales, fill out our sales statements, and then go to the silver wagon to turn in the sales receipts and our cash. The unsold tickets would be taken to Edna Antes at her tickets distribution office wagon, which was part of the side show banner line. There

Edna would count all the dead wood or unsold tickets for the performance, fill out her tally sheets, and bundle all the unsold tickets to be stored and eventually sent to winter quarters in Sarasota.

Wagon ticket sellers were Buddy Friele from Homestead, Florida, a close pal of General Manager Frank McCloskey; and Mark Johnson, brother of McCloskey's wife Fanny. Friele was at the general admission sales at the front of the silver wagon. He was considered to be the smoothest and fastest ticker seller on the show.

I always looked the part of a professional ticket seller in my blue Brooks Brothers uniform, neatly pressed slacks, starched blue shirt, and maroon tie. We wore hats with black patent leather brims and gold braid for trim. On cool nights we wore our uniform coats with gold trimmed buttons. Ticket sellers were a well groomed group of men as were the ushers.

During the come in Bill McGough would walk around to see if any seller needed need change, bills or more tickets. If a seller had a complaint, that he could not solve, Bill would step in and smooth the frustration of the customer. A tall man named Tex Copeland would also walk around at this time checking for any problem; he was a cool Texan married to Dolly Copeland, a flyer in one of the trapeze acts. I always had great respect for Tex. Many years later, at the Showfolks Club in Sarasota, I was able to tell Tex how much I respected him as a human being and boss on the show.

Sometimes at night when there was a small reserve seat sale or for one reason for another management was anxious to give the customers a

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A page from the 1953 Ringling-Barnum courier.

"John Robinson," or quick show. Bill McGough would come to me and ask that I move my ticket box down to the curve of the hippodrome track, in front of the end blues. Ushers would move the ticket box to directly

Cages inside the menagerie.



in front of the blues and when I was mounted in the ticket box, Bill would announce to the people in the blues that if the could come down and for seventy five cents that could purchase a comfortable reserve seat, with a much better view of the performance. This would later enable a crew of workingmen to quietly dismantle the bleachers, while the performance was in progress, and thus quicken the tear down.

Bill had a small electronic speaker to make the announcement to the customers. I would hold my roll of tickets high and before long I had a line of folks in front of the ticket box anxious to spend cash for better seats. I had to work fast, as the sheriff sale went

quickly. One at seventy-five, two at two fifty, three at three seventy-five and so on. I would move them along and quietly make myself a day's pay. Needless to say, I loved the sheriff's sale. I knew the number combinations that people would fall for and I really enjoyed doing this without getting any beefs. If they came back with charges that I over charged them, I would look down at some

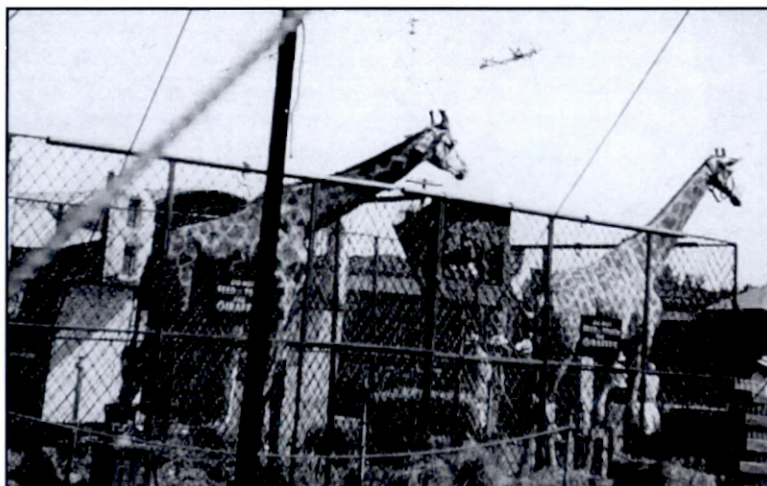
change on the ticket box counter and say, "Hey you left your money here, sorry."

A few nights after I became a ticket seller, Tommy Reale, a fellow ticket seller, asked me to stop at a bar near where our train was parked. We went in and ordered two cold beers, and he said, "Bill I have a few ideas to discuss with you about ticket selling; everyone likes you and wants you to do well. We like having you part of our team, but I need to clue you in on a few facts."

"Sure, Tommy," was my reply. He then told me that ticket sellers were expected to make some extra money from their sales booth in the form of walkaways, short changing, and upping the price of a few of their tickets. He then proceeded to show me how to up prices on certain tickets thus insuring an extra income for me with every sale. He said not to worry about management. Although it was a so-called Sunday school show, tickets sellers were expected to make extra money, and to pass a part of their extra income each night along to the head ticket seller for the privilege. I was not surprised by what Tommy told me as I had heard rumors. After all everyone had to tip for many services such as mail delivery, cook house waiter, uniform storage, sleeping car porter, and bus trip back and forth to the train.

I followed Tommy's advice and when I made a few extra dollars I would slip Bill McGough a five or ten after each show, depending on my income. Nothing was ever said but I know that my boss was appreciative. I was lucky and never had any serious beefs with any customers.

Once I started selling tickets in the menagerie or on the track in the main tent I would watch Pete Grace's ushers also work the crowds on the come in. They would direct people up the aisle of each section of seats to the proper row. This was their job but they would also chat with customers heading for the unreserved seats or blues and suddenly slyly take a tip from the customers and lead the fam-



The two giraffes on the show in 1954.

ily up to reserved seats. In a way they were competition to the ticket sellers. The idea was to make a few bucks, quietly and carefully, and tip the head usher after the show. Ushers were hard workers, each day spreading canvas, putting up side poles, tossing seat wagon bibles, ushering, and then pitching in at tear-down tossing bibles again, pulling side poles, untying and rolling canvas, and whatever else was necessary to load the show.

It was a long day starting early in the morning and ending between

Frank McClosky, general manager.



eleven or twelve at night depending on the weather. Once I became a ticket seller I did not have to work set up in the morning but at night I worked with Tommy Summerall's crew, tossing bibles, tossing iron stringers, and loading seat wagons, and then pulling side poles from the big top, unlacing canvas, and rolling canvass.

In many towns there would be a G top in the back yard. This was an unmarked tent usually as out of site as possible, and there you could find prop hands, riggers, electricians, ushers, ticket sellers and others who had a little extra money for a cold beer, shot of whiskey, or a game of craps. It was operated by a gangster-looking guy with one rule: don't cause trouble or you are out of here. I never was a great drinker and certainly not a gambler but I did go in once in a while for a cold beer. Emmett Kelley always had a cold beer to drink on a warm summer day, right after spec.

JACKIE BESSER AND THE MENAGERIE

In 1954 the big top had five center poles thus making a much larger tent. In the front section was the great menagerie. It was like a Noah's ark with all the elephants in a row, the air-conditioned white gorilla cages, the large wagon with the baby hippo and her water tank, and the two large wagons with enclosures for the two reticulated giraffes. There was a small cage wagon for Buddy the orangutan and also cage wagons with leopards, lions, tigers, polar bears, and assorted monkeys. The show also carried zebras and the ever popular camels.

The two large giraffes rode in two padded wagons that had attached

large enclosures for them to walk around in. One man and his assistant did nothing but care for the two of them. The menagerie had a classic animal smell and upon entering it you knew that you were at the circus. There is not a smell on earth like the delightful odor of the circus menagerie.

Usually directly opposite from the stake line of elephants was the menagerie stand. Here for over twenty seasons my friend Jackie Besser sold lemonade, orangeade, bags of peanuts, and Cracker Jacks. Jackie operated this stand for the Miller Brothers. He usually had two young performers helping him at setup, on the busy come in, and at tear down. For several seasons it was two from the Fredonia risley act, Bubbles and Bernie. Jackie was one of my special friends and I loved to spend free time visiting with him about the shows he had worked on, especially the John Robinson Circus.

My friend made the best orange drink on the show. Each day he mixed water with an orange powder and then thickened it with evaporated milk. He called it flukum. It was mixed in large stainless metal drums filled with chips of ice and water. The drink was served out of large glass dispensers filled with flukum, ice, and slices of orange or lemon.

Jackie flashed his stand with large stacks of Cracker Jacks at each end of the stand, and large baskets brimming full of bags of peanuts. Jackie stood there for hours mixing his drinks, filling bags of peanuts, stacking the Jacks, and serving his customers. I can still hear him pitching the "Ice cold orangeade, lemonade, peanuts, and Cracker Jacks." Sometime under his breath he would say to me, "Bill this is a spending crowd today," and at other times, "Wow these towners are cheap."

Jackie knew how to keep his stand



The four ticket wagons on the midway.

spotlessly clean and every time a customer put down an empty drink cup it was immediately tossed under the stand where there were at least two stainless steel pails full of Clorox and water. The cups would be washed, dried, stacked, and later put back on the stand. When I asked Jackie about this he said, "Bill, I have made thousands for the Miller Brothers and the show, and I have to earn a few extra bucks for Mr. and Mrs. Besser."

Each year, while we were at the Chicago stand, which lasted several days, Mrs. Besser would visit the show and spend time with her husband. She was a charming lady. When in Sarasota for the winter, I would sometimes ride my Cushman motor scooter over to the Bessers' new home at 1956 Rose and K Street. Mrs. Besser always treated us to a large dish of ice cream and a Lady Baltimore cake. During the 1954 season I was lucky to make the friendship of Jackie Besser and fifty years later I value his friendship more than ever.

A TRIP TO MADISON SQUARE GARDEN

When you are young you reach out beyond your immediate family or

community to make friends. One of the first friends I made was Packy McCabe of Lyons, New York, a town seven miles west of Clyde. When I was home from college for the 1953 Christmas vacation, I received a call from Packy. He told me that he had read in the *Lyons Republican* that I had spent the summer of 1953 working on the Ringling Show. He invited me to Lyons to have dinner with him and his wife and we had a great evening talking about my summer on the Greatest Show on Earth. He remembered the old days when the Barnum show had played Lyons and when Buffalo Bill had played Geneva, New York. He had a collection of old Buffalo Bill posters and programs. It seemed like I had known Mr. and Mrs. McCabe forever.

Packy was the first circus fan that I had ever met. He was a retired brakeman from the New York Central Railroad. He was proud of the gold picket watch that he had received for over fifty years of service to the railroad line. He was a jovial man and at seventy was old enough to have seen the Buffalo Bill Wild West, Barnum and Bailey, Hagenbeck-Wallace, Al G. Barnes, Walter L. Main and Sells-Floto.

After our first meeting, anytime I was home from school I headed to Lyons to see my friend. We were kindred spirits. He was the one person

who understood my love of outdoor show business. He was also was a personal friend of many circus folks, both performers and management people. He also taught me a trick that has kept me in good stead for many years. He used to say, "Bill, just walk into the backyard of a circus or entrance to a Shrine circus, stage door of a vaudeville house, just act as if you belonged there. No one will question you; just don't make a nuisance of yourself."

In January of 1954 after I returned to Hiram for the winter semester, I wrote to Packy. He replied in a few days and asked me if I would like to go to New York City with him in the spring to attend the circus at Madison Square Garden. He made arrangements for us to take the train from Lyons to New York in April.

While still at Hiram I had written to Frank McClosky, the General Manager of the circus, to request an appointment with him at the Garden office. I still have Frank McClosky's reply; it is one of my treasures. He invited me to meet him at the Garden office and said that he would talk with Willis E. Lawson, Assistant Manager, and ask him to find a position for me with the show after my graduation in June.

I had to tell my Aunt and Uncle as well as my Mother of my plans. Needless to say, my Aunt Inez was not pleased. Uncle Ed did not say much except that I was young and should have some adventure in my life, and as always my Mother was very supportive of my wishes. After all, I had kept my promise to her to leave the show in 1953 to return to Hiram College instead of going on to California for the remainder of the 1953 route.

When it was time for our New York trip Packy and I boarded a New York Central passenger train at Lyons and headed east toward Albany and then continued down the Hudson River Valley to Manhattan and Grand Central Station. We

walked east on Forty Second Street, to Eighth Avenue, and then north to the Edison Hotel, which was only about two blocks from the Garden.

I did not know it at the time but many of the circus performers stayed at the Edison. It was an important show business hotel. After a short rest, Packy and I enjoyed dinner at the hotel coffee shop and then took a short walk down Broadway. We saw the Palace Theater on Broadway, the George M. Cohan statue, the Astor Hotel, Jack Dempsey's restaurant, and the Diamond Horseshoe night club. Before we returned to the hotel we walked over to Eighth Avenue where we could see the marquee of the Garden.

The next morning we were up early, and after breakfast we went over to the 48th Street side of Madison Square Garden. We entered the Garden side door we were greeted by a dapper Danny McCarthy. He excused himself, went into and inner circus office, and came back with an attractive woman, Irma Pushnik Meyer, and he introduced her as Mr.

Lawson's secretary.

She walked with us into the inner circus office where I was to meet for the first time, Willis E. Lawson, Assistant Manager of the Greatest Show on Earth and a man who was to become my circus mentor.

To everyone in the business he was always "Lawson." After a few words about my work on ring stock during the summer of 1953, he asked if I would like to learn about the front end of the business. I agreed with his suggestion and then he told me that I could work on the Front Door of the show early in the season. That was fine with me. After graduation I would be with the Big Show as a ticket taker.

I liked Lawson from the moment I met him. When you were in his presence you realized that he was a young but knowledgeable circus veteran. He came up through the ranks of the great American Circus Corporation shows out of Peru, Indiana. After running away from an orphanage, as a kid, he joined out with the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus and thus a circus career was born. On the Wallace show he earned a

reputation as one of the best circus candy butchers, a young fellow who knew how to hustle the seats, with peanuts, popcorn, or ice-cold Coca Cola. At the same time, he learned how to move a circus in all kinds of weather, and during all kinds of problems. Lawson knew every part of the big show business but had a special love for the concession business. He could place the show on the lot, supervise the tearing down, get it to the train, and solve a myriad of personnel or logistical problems. At the same time he earned the respect of all the bosses, kinkers, and the hard working men.

As we left Lawson he gave us a pair of center ring tickets for the evening performance and I assured him that I would meet the show and

The cover of the 1954 program.



be ready to go to work in early June when they were playing the New England route.

That evening we had an early supper at an Italian restaurant on Eighth Avenue and then went to the Garden. When the doors opened we went downstairs to visit the menagerie and circus side show. It was all there, elephants, lions and tigers, Lotus the hippo, and of course the gorillas. There were stages for the side show folks from Frieda Pushnik, Betty Broadbent the tattooed lady, Priscilla the Monkey Girl, and big Dolly the fat girl.

We went up to our seats early and enjoyed watching Emmett Kelly and Otto Griebing work the New York audience on the "come in." Emmett as "Weary Willie" entered the arena in his tramp wardrobe, with a broom in his hand. His attention turned to the large circle of light on the center ring. With a broom in his hand, he slowly swept the ring of light into the center of the ring until the circle became smaller and smaller. Finally he swept the light under a ring mat to great applause.

Otto Griebing, on the other hand, worked a broader more robust type of comedy as he sauntered into the arena and gestured with pie pans in hand, so that everyone could see him. He stood in front of one side of the arena, clapped his three pie pans loudly, and juggled them for a few moments. He then clapped the pans together again, asking for applause. He made it obvious to the spectators with his gestures that he was not pleased with their applause. He then turned his back on them and walked off. He would repeat the juggling for the other side of the audience and naturally they would clap and applaud and cheer louder than the other side but still Otto was not happy. He repeated his performance again for each side until he received tremendous applause. Finally, he left the arena as the audience cheered him on.

Packy and I en-

joyed the circus that evening and had a great time in New York. Soon we were back in Lyons and I was off to Hiram to finish my college career. I was fond of college, and my college friends, but I was also looking forward to graduation. Doug Mitchell, the drama professor at college, was interested in my circus career and he assured me that I would love touring the country. Mr. and Mrs. Cannon, two of my professors, and Mary Louise Vincent, a popular English professor, were also pleased that I was going to join the circus. A lower class pal of mine, Richard Brooks, wanted me to keep in touch so that he could visit the show when we were in Cleveland.

I received my Bachelor of Arts degree from Hiram College on a lovely May day in 1954. My Mother Luella, Aunt Inez and Uncle Ed, and my Aunt Iva and our next door neighbor Eleanor Johnson were there. We had a fine dinner that evening and the next day we drove from Hiram, north to Painesville Ohio, northwest through Erie, Fredonia, and Buffalo and then east to Rochester and finally home to Clyde.

OFF TO THE CIRCUS IN 1954

It was a long trip but on the next morning my Aunt Iva and I were in Lyons early to catch a train to

The midway concession joints. Bob MacDougall collection.



Rudy Bundy.

Albany. Iva would meet her friend Frances there and I would go on to New York.

When I arrived in New York I walked from Grand Central Station down Forty Second Street and up Eighth Avenue to the Edison Hotel where I would again spend the night. After a bite to eat in the coffee shop I wandered back to Forty Second Street and finally decided to attend a John Wayne movie for fifty cents.

I arose early that next morning and took the train from Penn Station to Bridgeport, Connecticut and then a Bridgeport bus to the circus lot at Skirosky Park. I walked straight

down the midway to the Front Door or Marquee. I asked a chap standing there for Rudy Bundy, the head of the Front Door Department, and the man who was to be my new boss. The chap told me that Rudy was not on the lot yet but that his assistant Dick Miller would be back from the Cook House shortly. When Dick Miller arrived I introduced myself, we chatted for a few



moments and then he asked if I wanted to work the matinee or attend the afternoon performance. I told him that I was anxious to start work.

"Well Bill lets go back to the band top and see Maxie, who is in charge there, about a uniform for you." Before I knew it we were walking through the menagerie and then into the big top and along the hippodrome track, past the three rings, and out the back door and across the back yard to the band top. By this time, I was really getting excited for this was to be my first day on the Big One since last summer. This was a day that I had been looking forward to for a long time, ever since I had left the show at the Montgomery County Fair Grounds in Dayton, Ohio, the previous summer.

We walked into the band top and there was a large red circus wagon parked in the center of the top. The back end of the wagon was dropped down and it extended out several feet to form a platform about five feet off the ground. Miller looked up into the band wardrobe wagon and there was a short, muscular man, busily moving instrument cases toward the front of the wagon. "Maxie, this is Bill Taggart, he is a new man on the Front Door. How about a uniform for him so that he can work the matinee?"

"A first of May," Maxie asked and I was pleased to tell him that I was not, that I had been on Ring Stock the previous summer. "Some move," he said, "from the feed box to the ticket box." He quickly looked me over, walked into the back of the wagon and suddenly appeared with a blue Brooks Brothers uniform for me. "Try this on kid, it should fit okay."

Maxie was quick to tell me that I dressed each day before doors on the ushers' side of the tent, to stay out of the band side, to promptly turn in my uniform each night before blow off,

keep neat and clean, and that I received a fresh blue shirt each day. "One other thing, Bill, I don't do this work each day for nothing so remember that I take care of you and you take care of me. Okay, that way we will be friends." There was a table

an audience into the side show. After all, he was working on a percentage of ticket sales. I can still hear him saying "They are all alive, they are all entertaining, come in and see them now. See Senorita Carmen with her giant python snakes, Frieda Pushnik of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, the armless and legless girl, and Sealo the wonder boy."

As it was about noon lots of towners were gathered on the midway and Paul Fisher, who operated the number one hot dog stand on the midway, was busy selling hot dogs, hamburgers, coke, and coffee. He always used lots of flash, hot dogs and grilled hamburgers piled high and a large mass of onions on the grill. Mr. Fisher would pour steaming hot water over the onions as they were grilling and the aroma would bring the customers into his stand.

"Doggie, doggie, doggie, hot doggie, hot dog man, we have got the big ones," he would repeat over and over. Paul Fisher was one of

the great concession operators of all time for the Miller Bros. and a true circus gentleman. He was the hot dog king of the Ringling show.

Just after Dick Miller and I arrived back at the inside of the front door, Rudy Bundy entered the big show marquee. Dick introduced us, we shook hands and I didn't realize at the time but I was meeting one of the best bosses of my entire life. Rudy was a tall, handsome and distinguished looking man with a crop of white wavy hair, a ruddy face, and a broad welcoming smile. He was born and grew up in Quaker City, Ohio, near Zanesville and even while in high school he played clarinet in the local bands. His first professional engagement was with the Blossom Heath entertainers. Later he played with the George Olson band in the Broadway musical comedy Good

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Stirring grand finale symbolizing mankind's universal desire for freedom and friendship — humanitarian ideals of the sixty United Nations brought vibrantly to life in a bag-splashed, beauty-studded homage to brotherly love.

WORLD'S LARGEST TRAVELING MENAGERIE

A page from the 1954 Ringling-Barnum courier.

where we could wash up and shave along the sidewall of the tent and he gave us a duke bag to keep our toilet articles in and to store our clothing while we were in uniform. Soon I was dressed in my blue starched shirt, maroon tie, blue pants, uniform jacket and I felt great.

Dick Miller and I left the band top and headed back to the front door. Show time was 2 p.m. and doors opened at 1 p.m. so that people had time to visit the menagerie before going to their seats. As people gathered on the midway Bobby Hasson, the side show manager, had plenty of time to explain all the wonders that visitors would see on the inside of the side show. Bobby was an exciting talker and could "turn a tip" or bring

News. He was the featured clarinetist with the Benny Merhoff Orchestra in Chicago, and later appeared at the Palace Theater in

New York. For many years he fronted the Rudy Bundy Orchestra and was featured at the John Ringling Hotel in Sarasota at the popular M'Toto Room. He and John Ringling North became close friends and before long North talked him into playing in the Ringling band for Merle Evans. After a season North appointed him Superintendent of the Front Door.

There were just a few basic rules to follow working for Rudy. Be neat and clean, friendly to all customers, enjoy the work, and most of all be honest. All of these rules were easily followed while working for Rudy Bundy.

We worked hard at the front door answering questions before doors, and moving the lines of people forward into the menagerie. We tore their tickets and dropped the ticket stubs into large containers that hung on the entrance rails. They would be collected at the end of each performance and audited by the accounting department. After the performance was well under way some of us could take a break, go see part of the show, visit the pals who weren't working or head to the cookhouse once the supper flag was up. We ate early so that we could be back at the entrance before the blow-off or finale. We all ate on the short side of the cookhouse which was for executives, performers, ticket sellers, ushers, and front door men.

After the matinee, there was one and a half hours to visit with friends, relax, or crawl under a wagon to take a short nap. Some people would gather with friends and sit in the chairs in the big top to watch performers practice, or sit in folding canvas chairs around the band top or horse tops, or gather at Maxie Miller's backyard grease joint for coffee while others would sit with friends along the stake line of the big top, or around the concession wagons. Most of the circus folks would stay on the lot and in the back yard. Very seldom did anyone leave the lot between shows.

Another favorite place to relax was in the menagerie. Performers would be visiting their favorite elephants,

especially if they had some fresh fruit. Others would visit Buddy, the orangutan.

Between shows you could find me visiting with Jackie Besser, the manager of the menagerie peanut stand. Jose Thomas's little son, "monkey punk" would also be there trying to get his evening's take of free peanuts and orangeade. His dad was the caretaker of the gorillas.

The first day in Bridgeport, I worked the matinee and evening shows. Once each performance was underway we took down the metal passage gates in case there was an emergency and people had to leave the tent quickly. We also had to answer lots of question, "when would the show be over," "will there be an intermission," "where are the bathrooms," and if anyone came out of the

tent with a complaint or "beef" we would try to politely solve their problem. If it was a seat or viewing problem we would take them inside

to see Pete Grace, the head usher, or Bill McGough, the head ticket seller. If someone had a serious problem they would be taken to see Noyelles Burkhart, the Legal Adjuster or "fixer."

Noyelles had a big friendly smile, looked like a city lawyer and he would solve any problem. He had once been manager of Cole Brothers Circus, affectionately known as "the Cole show."

By six in the evening it was a bit cooler and we would be back at the front door, waiting for the evening customers to come by, ask questions, or just gather at the main entrance. Some of the Front Door men who worked with me that first year were Frank, Greg, Dick, Paul, and Ralph. I don't remember their last names. Two of the college students who were with us for a part of that summer were Carl Laun of Hobart College in Geneva, New York, and a friend of mine, Richard Brooks, a freshman at Hiram College. Carl was Irish, jovial, and good worker, and Richard was a

bit more serious but both enjoyed their summer on the show and working for Rudy Bundy. They both left the show after the Chicago run.

In the evening, once the spec was finished and while the performance was under way, our crew lowered the marquee lights, and the center and then the side poles. We then stretched the canvas out on the ground, folded and folded again, and then rolled the canvas into a large bundle. With a lot of effort we pushed the canvas roll into a large canvas bag and carried it to a nearby red baggage wagon. We loaded it with the metal front door gates, the ticket holders, the stakes and finally slid the center pole, side poles and light fixtures into the wagon. Before long that wagon would be on its way to the railroad runs.



The gilley bus that ran from the train to the lot.

As we were doing this, sidewall Baldy and Dutch, his partner, tied the sidewall closed, leaving one opening for late customers to make their way into the big top. If there were a lot of people outside on the midway, we would set up a ticket box and I would sell discounted tickets to those who wanted to go in and see the remainder of the performance. By this time, about ten o'clock, the four ticket wagons were all closed, and when the ticket sellers were finished counting money and tickets, the electric power was pulled, the wagon tongues lowered, and tractors were ready to pull the wagons to the runs.

Our front door crew was now ready to head back to the band top, see our friend Maxie, change into our work clothes, and then stop at Miller's grease joint for a coffee and sweet roll. It has been a long time since supper at the cookhouse, and the coffee and toasted sweet roll was a tasty

treat. As my friends and I walked along the stake line of the big top we realized that suddenly it was time for the blow off. It was around eleven on a warm Bridgeport night.

At this time there was excitement in the air. I always liked to say "Let the red wagons roll," as I really enjoyed the excitement of tear down. During the evening performance, after each act was finished working, their props were taken out of the top, loaded in the prop wagons and by the end of the finale, the big top was empty except for the three sets of ring curbs, the lighting and the sound equipment. As the public walked down from their seats and along each side of the hippodrome track and out onto the midway, even this equipment was being loaded. Soon the stakes that held down the quarter poles were being pulled so that the quarter poles could be lowered and loaded on the quarter pole wagon.



Pinito Del Oro.

Wagons were being loaded by each department, crews were shouting, giant caterpillar tractors moved wagons, trucks hauled closed wagons to the runs, teams of elephants were starting to pull pole wagons into

position and crews were beginning to even untie a few stake ropes around the perimeter of the big top. On good nights there were lots of town folks standing back watching the hustle as the tented city was preparing to depart and go on to the next stand.

Even while the public was leaving the big top crews were organized to tear down the seat wagons on the long and short sides of the big top. Candy butchers and some performers would tear down the short side or back side of seats and ushers, front door men, program men, and other performers, working for "cherry pie" would tear down the front or long side of seats. I worked with a crew headed by usher Tommy Sommerall, a nephew of former big top boss Cap Curtis. Dick Anderson, a flying act catcher and program man, also worked in our crew. We became special friends. Each crew numbered about ten and was fast workers.

We would walk up a seat section aisle, lower rows of seats, and when that was finished the fronts of the wagon would be hoisted up, the sides folded down and then we would quickly toss the lower rows of seats, which were on "bibles" into the interior of the wagons. With this finished the stringers that supported the bibles and seats would be loaded. Finally the "A" frames or jacks, that formed the support system, would be quickly tossed into the wagons. It was hard work but we moved quickly from wagon to wagon, down the line toward the back end of the tent. There were several teams on our side. Our team loved to beat the butcher side of the big top, but this wasn't easy.

While we were tearing down the seat wagons, big top men were lowering the quarter poles on each side of the track, while outside workers would be loosening guy ropes, pulling stakes, and removing some of the outside side tent poles. Baldy and his crew by now had all the tent sidewall sections

down, folded and rolled. A team of elephants worked in the tent pulling the heavy quarter poles into position so that men could load them onto pole wagons.

When our crews finished all the seat wagons, we would gather at various side poles still standing on the outside perimeter of the top and wait for George Warner, the big top boss, to give the down command. The huge bale rings around each center pole would fall quickly and before the bale rings reached the ground Warner blew a whistle and crews all around the tent pulled the side poles, and finally the huge tent floated to the ground.

In an instant our crew was walking the air out of the top and quickly unlacing section after section of the top. The huge sections were then stretched out, folded over and over, until each section was long and narrow and ready to be rolled. Each section rolled would be six feet wide and five feet high. A huge rope loop would be placed around each canvas roll and the caterpillar tractor would lift and load the sections into the canvas trucks. When this was done the big top canvas would be on the way to the runs.

When we were finished my pals and I headed to a spot along the street where the Ringling show bus was parked. We rushed toward it, jumped in line and climbed aboard as soon as Larry the driver opened the door. That night it was a short drive to the runs and the train.

On June 9, 1954 we played Waterbury, Connecticut, and then made a jump of 32 miles to Wallingford, Connecticut. We did good business in both towns before jumping 132 miles to Worcester, Massachusetts on Saturday. June 1 we were in Springfield, Massachusetts and getting ready to leave that part of New England. My Aunt Inez and Uncle Ed visited and were invited to lunch by Noyelles and Hilda Burkhardt. My folks enjoyed meeting the Burkhardts.

On Sunday June 13 we jumped 102 miles on the New York Central to Albany, and our trains were spotted right downtown, near the Hudson River. It was a short haul to the James E. Strates Carnival lot north of downtown, in an area named

Menands. We were playing directly across from the Ringling Circus lot of the 1930's. It was there that I saw Ringling, Hagenbeck-Wallace, and the Tom Mix circus.

After Albany we played Glenn Falls on June 15 at a lot at the north end of the city, which is now the site of a shopping center. It is also close to the cemetery where the great bareback riding sensation Poodles Hanneford and his family are now buried. While I was standing at the front door taking tickets I looked down the midway and suddenly I could see Mr. Elmer Norton and his grandchildren approaching.

When I was a small boy living in Easton Mr. Norton's farm was just down the road from where I lived. It was directly across the road from the one room school house in Easton where I attended grades one through five. Mr. Norton and his son Harold always had time for a boy who loved their team of Belgium horses, Queenie and King. To me they were the greatest horses in the world.

Many a summer day, I would sit high on the hay wagon with the team's reins in my hands, driving them up the field while Mr. Norton and Harold forked loose hay high into the wagon. Seeing Mr. Norton brought back fond memories of my childhood, my love for horses, and one of the great reasons I fell in love with the circus.

I insisted and he and his family were to be my guests and I had front row center ring tickets for them at the matinee. My friend Meeks, the ticket wagon caretaker, escorted them to their seats in the big top. When the show began, I was able to join them for a few minutes. They especially enjoyed the liberty act, ménage number, and the dressage horses. After the show, I was able to take them for a tour of the horse tops. We all had a nice visit after the show and I was sad to see them leave the lot.

That night during teardown, a quarter pole from the big top slipped and hit Les Thomas, the Superintendent of Seating, in the head as it fell. He was severely injured and had to be flown back to Sarasota. He was a retired flyer and a friend of Arthur M. Concello, and with Concello he designed our seat-



Noyelles Burkhardt

ing wagons. It was a great loss to the show. To make matters worse, one of the railroad cars was derailed as we were leaving town and our haul to Schenectady was delayed for several hours.

On June 16 and a bit late the Delaware and Hudson and New York Central hauled our trains to Schenectady, New York and we ended up on a lot that was sand from front to end, the dirtiest lot I had ever been on. We were late for the matinee, everyone was tired, and the whole show was in bad spirits. The Royal American Carnival train was also in the railroad yards.

Early on the morning of June 17 the Delaware and Hudson hauled the three sections on to Oneonta, New York. This was a college town and I was amazed to see several college girls working for free tickets pulling canvas, setting up chairs, and having a good time. We had a grassy big lot and the show looked great. The usher department loved looking at all the attractive college girls. Tommy Sommerall had a field day.

Our next spot June 18 was Binghamton, New York. The lot was right next to the Susquehanna River. This was performance director Pat Valdo's home town. When he grew up here he was Patrick Fitzgerald and planning on becoming a cigar maker. He attended a vaudeville show, was hit by the showbiz bug and never returned, but went on to be the kinker

boss for many seasons.

Saturday June 19 the Erie railroad hauled us to Elmira. Our cars were right in town but the show played the County Fairgrounds a short distance away. Once again the show looked great on the green grass and we had a good date. Our crew at the front door all went to a little country restaurant for dinner. Before doors I sat in a Victoria Carriage with Doc Henderson and had a visit about the horses in ring stock.

On June 20, we had a 59 mile run on the Erie to Geneva. I don't remember a thing about Geneva except that two Hobart College stu-

dents joined the show and our front door crew for the summer. The one that I remember was Carl Laun who has remained a friend to this day.

On June 21 we headed to Watertown, a run of 134 miles on the New York Central. We made Carl and his friend at home in our railroad car, in the cookhouse, and at the front door. He was a big guy and thus a great "bible tosser." He really helped our crew at tear down. Rudy and all the crew liked Carl and his friend and we were proud of our college crew. The day we played Watertown it was hot and we headed to a local pub for a beer and to enjoy the air-conditioning, which was a treat.

It was a short jump to Syracuse, where we were to play the New York State Fairgrounds, but both performances were cancelled because of heavy rain and windstorms. It was a day lost, but still lots of hard work in bad weather. This was on June 22.

Wednesday, June 23, found us in Auburn in the NYC railroad yards. It was short haul to a lot on the west side of the small city. My mother was working here and I was able to have her as my guest in the cookhouse between shows. Before the evening show I was able to introduce my mother to Emmett Kelley and he signed his new book *Clown* for her.

On June 24 we were in Oswego and another hot day in northern New York state. Business was good. When we were not working we sat high in

the stands and watched Pinito DeOro perform on the high trapeze. This petite Spanish lady was a star. She was featured in a production number "Rocket to the Moon."

It was an 80-mile run on the NYC to Rochester on the 25th. This was the city where I had seen many editions of the Ringling show with my Aunt Inez. City busses ran from downtown to the circus lot. The show always did good business here. That night before I fell to sleep in my berth on the train, I had the feeling that we were gradually starting to head west and into cities that I was not to familiar with.

On June 25 we played Batavia and June 26 North Tonawanda, a city noted for the manufacture of outstanding merry-go-rounds. On Monday June 28 we were in Jamestown, the childhood home of Lucille Ball. Then we jumped to Youngstown on June 29. It was here that I had hitchhiked from Hiram College to see the movie Greatest Show on Earth. One of the shortest jumps of the season was to New Castle, Pennsylvania, only eighteen miles on the Pennsylvania railroad.

From July 1 through 3 we played a lot next to Kennywood Amusement Park on the outskirts of Pittsburgh. The park was established in 1898 by the trolley car company that served Pittsburgh. When they had time, show folks visited the park and rode the old wooden roller coaster. Veteran performers loved telling about the days that they played the park; some of the older clowns got their start there. Justino Loyal had done a season there with the riding act; he said that it was a "piece of cake" being in one spot for a season, but as dull as dishwater. We were able to get a rest on this stand and to eat at some local restaurants. The ushers went on a spending spree and Pete Grace was mad as a hornet when some of them returned to the lot after come in started. Rudy and Mrs. Bundy entertained friends and looked forward to some rest after we left town.

On July 4, we jumped three hundred and eighteen miles on the Pennsy to Hagerstown, Maryland where we showed on Monday, July 5 to good business. On Sunday crowds turned out to see the ring stock

arrive on the lot. Pete Grace had lots of punks to help spread the canvas and when the ticket wagons were spotted they were opened to sell advance tickets for the next day's performance. Bobby Hanson even opened the sideshow and was able to turn a few visitors to the show. It was a festive day. I got to visit with a distinguished looking man to turned out to be a local photographer who had a great collection of circus pictures.

He took me to his studio to see some of his collection and before I left town I had ordered a great picture of Felix Adler and an inside shot of the show taken during spec. It is now my favorite picture of the circus prior to 1956.

On Tuesday, July 6 we steamed into the railroad yards of Harrisburg, the state capitol. Noyelles Burkhardt was off the train early, as he had to take care of both city hall and the Governor's office. We used lots of passes that day, most of them for reserved seats. Early that morning, before all the wagons were spotted, I sat along the river bank with Mr. and Mrs. Pat Valdo. Mrs. Valdo was once a member of the Orrin Davenport riding act. She traveled along with Pat for many seasons and her brother Freddy Meers worked in the accounting department.

On July 7, we were in Williamsport, Pennsylvania famous as the home of *Grit* magazine that was sold house to house for many years. On many occasions it published colorful articles on the circus. One of our ushers, Robbie, a naval veteran, was from this town. I will always remember the large tattoo of a sailing ship that he displayed proudly on his chest. He was proud of Williamsport and that it was a good show town.

On July 8 we moved on to DuBois, Pennsylvania, and set up at the fairgrounds. It was a grassy lot and business was good. Harry, the show barber, set up his tent and I was able to get a good haircut without going to town. Between shows some of us sat behind the sideshow tent and had a good visit with Daisy Doll and her usher friend Pee Wee. This was an on and off romance. That evening, down at the cars, one of the German kinkers played his accordion for us and sang a few old German songs.

We moved 87 miles on July 10 to

Washington, Pennsylvania. I went inside the tent with Carl and watched a riding act rehearse. Otto Griebeling was there teaching a few tricks to a younger rider. Also standing by were Freddy and Mickey Freeman, formerly riders with the great May Wirth riding act. Clown alley was astir as midget clowns Jimmy Armstrong and Frankie Saluto were having an ongoing argument over their roles in Paul Jung's army routine. They had the rest of the clowns breaking their ribs with laughter. Someone told Frankie that John North was going to fire him if he learned of the feud. This had Frankie all upset.

Early on Sunday July 11 we moved 115 miles on the Baltimore and Ohio to Zanesville, Ohio where we were to have a day off after setup. We played the fairgrounds, and as this was near Rudy Bundy's hometown, his parents came to visit and take he and Mrs. Bundy home for dinner. The show looked fresh and great on the grassy infield of the race track.

All around the perimeter of the grounds were huge maple trees. After our work was done I went with an usher friend of mine to the YMCA to rent rooms for the night, have a hot shower, and go out to a local restaurant for a fine dinner. Lots of performers headed to town for a meal and a Sunday movie. Back on the lot, the ring stock and menagerie animals enjoyed a restful day, most of them stretched out and resting.

On July 13 we found ourselves in hot, muggy weather in Parkersburg, West Virginia. All of us worked up a heavy sweat as we spread canvas, lifted quarter poles into place and tossed the seat wagon bibles. When the front door marquee was finished our morning work was done and we headed to the Ohio River, near the lot, to take a cool swim. We were tired. After tear down that night we bought hamburgers and cold beers from Mr. Martinez, our car porter. We jumped aboard the train just as it started to pull out and before long we were rolling through the night on the Baltimore and Ohio. I kept my jalousie window open to enjoy the cool night air. I quickly fell asleep as we rolled southward along the banks of the Ohio River.

After a 121-mile run, we arrived in

Huntington, West Virginia on July 14. Once again, a hot, sultry day greeted us. Carl and I ate breakfast in the cookhouse with an usher named Glen Hart, also known as Sea Cow. He was a colorful character, noted for his sense of humor, and his open gayness. When it came to his work, however, he was all business. Set up went quickly as we had plenty of extra help who were working for free passes.

Thursday July 15 we jumped fifty miles to Charleston, West Virginia, and after two shows there we headed north to Columbus, Ohio. I wrote home from Charleston that we had three days of unbearable heat with the temperature almost hitting 107 degrees. Everyone on the show was irritable.

As it was a long run we set up for a night show only on July 16 in Columbus, and gave two shows on July 17. During the morning while spreading canvas two ushers, Shotgun and Killer Kane, got into a scuffle. This disagreement lasted all morning and continued on the band top. Maxie shouted, "Okay girls just shut up, enough is enough." He did not want any trouble and wanted it quiet before Merle Evans arrived. The band top was considered Merle Evans territory, and you were expected to be on good manners.

When we arrived at the front door for the evening show Rudy Bundy was full of stories about fellow clarinet player and vaudevillian Ted Lewis. Columbus was about thirty miles north of Circleville, Ohio, Lewis's hometown. Lewis had made a million dollars when he recorded the Tiger Rag and created the phrase "Is Everybody happy?"

Sunday July 18 found the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey big top flags flying high over Springfield, Ohio. This was the hometown of Lew Bader, number one trombone player in the band. Early country music recording artist and tent show impresario Bradley Kincaid owned the radio station here and was a friend of Lew's. Great weather, a grassy lot and good Sunday business

made our day in Springfield a pleasant experience.

During the early morning of July 16 we jumped 73 miles on the Pennsylvania to Cincinnati, Ohio. Just before dawn Mr. McGrath, the trainmaster, was up and with a cup of coffee in his hand he was at the runs and ready to start unloading the first section's wagons. He was familiar with the railroad yard as he had played the spot many times with the Cole show when he was trainmaster there. Before long he was met by George Blood, the superintendent of the cookhouse. The two veteran circus men watched as the cookhouse wagons were pulled down the steel ramps, hitched one to another, and started for the circus lot. When the Ringling bus came off the train, Blood and his cookhouse crew loaded into the bus and headed for the lot and a long day's work.

The morning hours were muggy but the crew spread the cookhouse canvas, drove the stakes, positioned the side poles, placed the cookhouse

Hilda Nelson Burkhardt and husband.



flags into position, and raised the Hotel Ringling flag in preparation for breakfast in a short time. Waiters set up the many tables in the short and long ends of the cookhouse as the ovens, stoves and large cooking kettles were fired up. Some men were peeling potatoes for lunch while others were cooking ham and eggs and oatmeal for breakfast. Blood met the 24 hours man who was there to oversee the delivery of bread, produce, and meat for the two day stand. The cookhouse generators kept the large refrigerator wagons cold.

In a short time our front door crew would be headed to the cookhouse for breakfast and then begin a day of hard work spreading canvas and tossing bibles. When all this was done we headed to the band top to clean up, shave, and dress for the matinee, and, before doors, a lunch at the cookhouse. We were hoping for cube steak, mashed potatoes, and a cool lettuce and tomato salad.

Lawson stopped by the front door to tell me that his wife Marjorie and daughter Linda were flying up from Sarasota for a brief visit. I was anxious to see them as I was fond of both Linda and Marjorie.

MISS HILDA

One of the most fashionable dressed women on the show was Hilda Nelson Burkhardt, wife of the show's legal adjuster, Noyelles Burkhardt. They had met and married years earlier when she was a performer on the Cole Brothers Circus, and Noyelles was the manager of the show for owner Zack Terrell. Hilda was a member of the famous Nelson family, one of the greatest acrobatic and risley acts of all time. She also worked a low wire act with her sisters Oneida and Rosina. A younger brother, Paul, was also a noted performer and Terrell often referred to him as the "Little Jesus."

Miss Hilda would sometimes go from their stateroom on the train with Noyelles in the morning, have a nice breakfast at a hotel, and



Hilda and her sisters were featured in this Ringling-Barnum poster. Cincinnati Art Museum collection.

then go shopping while her husband called on the necessary officials at City Hall as well as the local police department. Hilda loved to shop and was noted for her designer hats, gracefully cut dresses, many times with a larger white collar, and a navy blue color. She always carried a patent leather shoulder purse and wore patent leather shoes to match. Her outfit was topped off with a colorful designer necklace and matching earrings.

Hilda would arrive on the lot, shortly afternoon and usually in time to have lunch at the cookhouse. Sometimes she would meet Edna Antes at the ticket distribution office and they would walk to the cookhouse together. Hilda would entertain Edna with tales of great sales downtown and Edna would always say, "Good gosh, I never have time to do any shopping."

After lunch Hilda and Edna would return to the ticket distribution wagon and prepare for the matinee. Before doors Hilda would go to a pass booth or the tax box as circus folks called it. It was Hilda's job to exchange press and other passes for tickets for the performance. If the customer needed extra seats she

would sell them. A charge of \$1.00 was usually collected for each pass exchanged. All tickets sold at the tax box were punched with a hole so that they could not be sold or turned in for cash. The tickets were known as "Annie Oakley's," because Oakley supposedly shot holes in tickets on the Buffalo Bill Wild West.

When I worked the tax box with Hilda she loved to tell me about her and her sisters' escapades in vaudeville, on the John Robinson Circus in the 1920s and on the Cole circus in the 1930s. Each day she would tell me that when she and her sisters were young they could do complete flip flaps all around the hippodrome tack. She was especially proud of the

fact that the Nelson family was featured at the first Shrine Circus, held in Detroit in 1906. She was proud of brother Paul, a noted horse trainer, and sister Estrella, who married Zack Terrell. Another sister, Adele, married Louie Reed and worked vaudeville and circus dates with their famous elephant act. I was fascinated to learn that they lived in upstate New York in the little railroad towns of Chatham in the Berkshires.

I always enjoyed working with Miss Hilda and she and husband Noyelles were two of my best friends.

Years later, after the show closed in 1956, Hilda went to work as a sales person in Maas Department Store in Sarasota. When I was living in upstate New York and teaching school I continued to receive lovely letters from Miss Hilda until she passed away. Hilda and Noyelles lived at 422 South Lime Street in Sarasota.

PAUL FISHER'S MIDWAY HOT DOG JOINT

During the 1954 season I was working the front end of the show and thus I got to know many people

Concession stands on the midway. Dom Yodice collection.



that I hardly knew while working in the backyard on ring stock in 1953. There were many colorful and interesting people working the front end. One was Paul Fisher who operated the Number 1 food concession stand on the midway. Others were Bobby Hasson, kid show manager; Joe Trosey, the bug man; Ed Kelly, who represented the Ringling 49ers interests; Jimmy Ringling, son of Robert Ringling; and Jimmy Littler, the popcorn man. There was also Side Show Bob who assisted Bobby Hasson; and side show ticket sellers Scott Hall and Mike Bergen. Scott's dad, Doc Hall, was a 24 hour man, and Mike Bergen's dad had once been the show doctor.

A chap named Red ran the front end diner on the midway, and a black man ran the soft ice cream wagon. All of the folks were ready for a session of cutting up jackpots when there was a bit of free time. Frank Kora operated the cotton candy joint and his wife Charlotte Bell, daughter of noted clown Charlie Bell, would assist him between shows. Charlotte was a great friend and a wonderful flyer in Dick Anderson's act.

A man called the Sheriff, Elvin Welch, always had a Ford station wagon parked on the outside of the midway and his job was to run all kinds of errands for the Miller Brothers Concessions. Frank and Paul Miller owned the concessions on the show. Brother Maxie Miller operated the grease joint in the backyard. A serious man, Mel Hamlin, was responsible for checking in and out all the concessions that were taken from the main concession tent. He was noted for being one of the best and most honest men on the show. Mel had been on the road all his life. He came to America in the 1920's as an acrobat from Morocco.

As soon as the concession equipment wagons were spotted along the edge of the midway Fisher and his two helpers would start unloading a stick joint and spot it between the side show banner line and the big show marquee. Paul ran the number one joint on the midway. When the canvas top was placed over the frame of the roof, and the sides rose, the front of the joint was locked in place, the gas grills were spotted, and before long Fisher and crew were



Another view of the concession stands. Bob MacDougall collection.

ready to start cooking.

One helper would be peeling and slicking large onions, while the other would be chopping green and red peppers. They would be stored on ice in the large coolers at the rear of the joint. These coolers would also be loaded with large hot dogs, and hamburgers. On one side of the joint was a large Coke cooler filled to the brim with iced small Coke bottles. Nearby, a large stack of wooden Coke cases, each filled with twenty-four bottles, stood ready.

If the weather was clear and fine, only the sidewall would be attached to the back of the joint and the other sides would be folded but ready to be raised in case of a storm. Paul Fisher was always dressed in a clean white shirt, khaki slacks, and standard working shoes. On his head he wore a white paper hat, usually advertising the brand of hotdogs or rolls he was serving. It was rare when you ever saw Mr. Fisher sitting down or away from his stand.

Paul stood for hours in front of his

grill, rolling the dogs over the heat, stirring the onions and peppers, or patting down the burgers. He was a past master of grilling. The large glass sections in the front of the grills were always clean and spotless, as was the serving board over the top of the glass and grill. From mid-morning until tear down you could smell the onions, peppers, hotdogs, and hamburgers gently cooking on Fisher's grill. If there was not the right aroma, Paul would pour a little water over the onions, add a few secret spices, and stir the onions and peppers. Suddenly, there was a new tasty smell and customers lining up to enjoy the food.

Finally there was always the musical sound of Paul Fisher's voice singing out "Doggie, doggie, doggie, hot doggie man, tell the man how many." Over and over again he pitched his product like a street vendor of old. When the dogs or burgers were served, each customer would leave the stand with an ice cold drink. Like his friend Jackie Besser, Paul was a true and great concession operator and a veteran of many seasons on the sawdust trail.

This article will be followed by another covering Bill Taggart's 1955 and 1956 Ringling-Barnum seasons.

Norma Davenport Cristiani Remembers

Great Elephant Stampede, Autry-Not Gene, Brown Bomber

By Lane Talburt

PART FOUR

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This is the fourth in a series of articles on Norma Davenport Cristiani, who was featured as the world's youngest elephant trainer on the long-defunct Dailey Bros. Circus. Ms. Cristiani and her parents, Ben and Eva Davenport, were inducted into the Sarasota Ring of Fame in 2007.

Gene Autry's kid brother was a no-show when the Dailey Bros. elephant herd stampeded at winter quarters on April 6, 1949. As Norma Davenport Cristiani recalls, the show's featured star was "indisposed" and unable to attend a publicity photo session.

But with "Doug Autry in Person" already painted on circus wagons, Norma's father, Ben Davenport, was stuck with the pseudo-cowboy and his drunken behaviors.

The elephant roundup and the signing of Autry were minor events compared to another pre-season change. With circus co-owners Ben and Eva Davenport having separated during the 1948 tour, Texas industrialist Harry Hammill stepped in to buy out Mrs. Davenport's interest. Norma's parents were married in 1930 and had been business partners for the past 18 years. The couple never obtained a divorce.

In 1949 the 17-year-old multi-talented Norma shared center-ring solo status with, "Little Butch, the world's smallest elephant," and Autry, a previously unknown and unheralded performer. Norma recently recalled her father's hiring Autry on the advice of the show's legal adjuster, Bill Moore, who told Davenport he needed a "big name" to reflect the growing impact of Dailey Bros. on the American circus scene.

The wily owner was already thinking along those lines. A July 31,

1948, article in *Billboard* indicated that Davenport wanted to get one, if not more, good name attractions for the show. "You've got to give people something new, something they haven't seen. And right now we're working on that. I don't know what we'll come up with next year but you can bet it will be good," Ben said with a smile.

(Doug) "Autry in Person"

Unwilling to spend the big bucks for a major attraction, Davenport signed Doug Autry "sight unseen." "We didn't even know if he could sing," Norma chuckles. The managing partner ordered bill paper promising circus goers they would see "Autry in Person." Gene Autry took the circus to court over what he considered the misuse of his name, but his challenge was unsuccessful. Dailey Bros. did alter its promotional approach by displaying "Doug" in small letters above the larger "Autry." Because he obviously did not resemble his famous brother (the young Autry was taller, for example), Doug's

image was seldom seen in publicity materials.

Doug Autry's duties under the big top consisted of a brief appearance in the main performance to promote his passable singing and rope-spinning talents in the Wild West after show. Although he was popular with performers and audiences, Autry created problems for the show almost immediately on his arrival at winter quarters.

Despite Autry being under the weather for the pre-season parading of the elephant herd for the benefit of the media, the event proceeded as planned. On April 7, 1949, the *Gonzales Inquirer* reported on the resulting ruckus at the Davenport spread, apparently triggered by a couple of horse-mounted hands firing their pistols into the air to get the bull herd to march more quickly before awaiting cameras.

"Eighteen bulls out of the circus herd of 21 elephants went on a rampage and stampeded out of the winter quarters of the circus to roar across the southeast end of Gonzales for more than two hours before all were rounded up and corralled in their barn to quiet down.

"Two men were slightly hurt in the stampede. Rex Williams, 26, former Marine, a head elephant man with the circus, was bumped by a bull and sent flying probably 20 feet. He was cut and bruised.

"Raymond Freivogel, 30, utility man, who was in front of the herd, made a leap for safety and stumbled as the elephants advanced. He fell between two logs that had been rolled into place for a prop, and this proved to be the lucky accident that saved his life.

"The herd, all but one, Little Butch, was safe before sunset. It was not until many hours later that Little Butch was located in the woods, six miles out, and

Doug Autry. Pfening Archives.



brought home in Davenport's Cadillac."

Hammill: New "Dailey Brother"

Harry Hammill had his private rail car hooked onto the Dailey Bros. train when the circus opened for the hometown folks (*sans* the grift) on April 16, 1949. To keep the train within its 25-car allotment, Davenport dropped the advance rail car which the circus used during the previous season, reverting to truck-based billposting. Accompanying the elderly Hammill was his new wife, a nurse who had been his caregiver during recovery from knee-replacement surgery.

Eva Davenport remained behind at her mother's home in Quincy, Illinois, when the circus kicked off the 1949 season with its traditional performance before the home folks at Gonzales on April 16, 1949. But Norma remembers her mother showing up on various lots along the route, being chauffeured in her Cadillac limousine by a worker that Ben had kicked off the train the previous season. As for her father, Norma indicates that Ben was infatuated with a Mexican performer. Eva was still financially involved in the show's fortunes, having signed a pre-season note loaning \$30,000 to Hammill.

On the surface, the partnership between Ben and Harry seemed to be a good fit both professionally and personally. For example, Norma points out, Hammill and her father presented Norma with her first car in 1949, a grey Cadillac convertible with red leather seats and trimming. Norma totaled the car in late that year by running it into a ditch during a winter date with an indoor circus, her cousin Rosemary Stock recalls. None of the occupants, which included Norma's husband Corky Plunkett was injured. But Rosemary says Ben was none too happy while helping the troupe arrange transportation to the next town.

Both Ben and Harry had experienced wanderlust in their younger years, each running away from home to dabble in various aspects of outdoor show business. But while Davenport, a West Virginia native, stayed with circus life, the Canadian-



Doug Autry, at left, with Ben Davenport. Pfening Archives.

born Hammill had ventured into real estate, oil and other investments.

Fred H. Phillips, a Canadian contributor for *Billboard*, described Hammill as a "tall, elderly, deacon-like multimillionaire from Austin, Texas, to whom the circus is a ledger entry and a bank deposit. He is seen but little in big top or back yard. Instead he shuttles between his car, the downtown ticket sale, the local bank, and the 30 wagon."

Phillips, who got to know the partners during a two-week visit on the train in 1949, painted Davenport as "florid, lusty and gussy at 51." Davenport, he wrote, "sees the circus as a physical property. To him it's a glorious, wild-and-wooly, rough-and-tumble thing, a thing you have to grasp in your bare hands."

Autry, no Doug, bill posting. Pfening Archives.



Hammill, who had partnered with Davenport in the single-season Austin Bros. rail show in 1945, was anxious to get back into the circus business when he approached the Davenports. Ward Hall, who began his sideshow career on Dailey Bros. as a 15-year-old in 1946, remembers Hammill inspecting the show's assets at San Angelo, Texas, on November 8, 1948, as the season was winding down. Hall recalls Davenport ordering workers to set up all tents and equipment, including some that were not normally used on the show, for the two performances. (Davenport eschewed sponsors, choosing lot-and-license dates.) Hammill liked what he saw and inked the deal to purchase Eva's share of the circus.

Under the deft routing of veteran general agent and traffic manager R. M. Harvey, the circus stuck mostly to its small-town base, where it could generate large crowds and fix the local cops to allow its rigged games and cooch dancers in the side show. The show also frequently crossed paths with its principal rivals that likewise were attempting to take advantage of the booming post-war economy and bumper agricultural harvests.

Dailey Bros. left a big footprint everywhere it set up. Norma estimates that the show's layout required a minimum of three and one-half acres.

On returning for the 1949 tour, side show performer Hall was surprised to see a larger, six-pole big top, seven-pole menagerie top, five-pole side show top, and a larger pad room, cook house and horse tops.

There were now 27 elephants (with Smokey Jones as bull superintendent), plus camels, a zebra, a brown bear act, chimps, equines numbering 103, five rings of ponies, dogs and monkeys; the big lion act worked by Joe Horwath; 10 polar bears worked by Raymond Freivogel; five rings of liberty horses; 20 clowns with Bobo Barnett producing; 22 high school horses with specialty dancing horses on the track, including Mildred Pyle doing the waltz and rear; the Riding Martinis; 22 aerial ladders, with Emma Campa on traps over the center ring; 24 web girls, with cloud swings featuring Manuel Barragon; five rings of wire, with Billy Powell

performing the somersault in center ring; Eddie Murillo-Victor Gaona casting troupe; and Del Moral Brothers, perch. Hall also remembers Gee Gee Engesser, Billy Powell's wife, performing with a 16-horse hitch around the hippodrome. And, points out Hall, "there was always a live 15-piece band."

Onward to Canada

The new partners' strategy was to conquer the small towns of Canada, which they proceeded to do, grift and all. After playing mostly Midwestern U.S. dates, Dailey Bros. entered Canada from Michigan, crisscrossing the provinces twice. Though the north-of-the-border tour was highly profitable, the show suffered a significant loss during its stay in Vancouver, British Columbia.

When Indian mahout Arumai Singh opened the door to Little Butch's wagon for its morning feeding, he discovered the baby elephant had died during the night. Norma says a subsequent necropsy showed that Butch had been the apparent victim of a digestive tract blockage, an all-too-common occurrence among baby elephants.

Though the tiny bull and Doug Autry may have been more prominently featured in publicity and advertising, Norma still garnered considerable attention "as the world's youngest elephant trainer," a role she relished since renowned trainer Louis Reed taught her the nuances of working and performing with the pachyderms in 1943.

In the absence of her mother, Norma assumed greater responsibilities in planning and executing the performance. She conceived and produced the opening spec, "The Flags of All Nations." She had the use of two carloads of surplus costumes and props which Davenport purchased from Ringling Bros. Donna Dee Pyle, daughter of boss canvasman Paul Pyle, learned to ride in a chariot acquired from the Big One. Donna later married Joe McMahon.

Norma the Spec Producer

From her own multi-faceted performing experiences, Norma instinctively knew how to piece together the order of procession into the big top.

"We had big boxes of flags, and the ones [performers] that were walking would carry them and hold them out. Then came the horses. You had to be very careful with animals, because you couldn't put a camel that was scared of an elephant right on top of each other. You had two or three people walking in between."



Reserve ticket sellers in the "squeeze box." Pfening Archives.

Although Eva had been her devoted tutor in the circus arts, it fell to Norma's dad to indoctrinate her in day-to-day operations. "What I learned from my dad was everything that was done around the show. He would take me and show me a hot box on the train. And he taught me how to make money."

Her expanded duties often left her exhausted, especially given the turn-away crowds which the circus was attracting throughout Canada. "We did fantastic business. I've never seen anything like it," says Mrs. Cristiani. "I remember in Halifax, Nova Scotia, the midway was packed. I was working the tax box and doing seven acts in the show. We did four shows that day. And by the fourth show, I was so tired that I didn't think I was ever going to get up the web again."

But she did, swinging from the ropes with 20 other showgirls. Norma also performed with husband Corky Plunkett in his trampoline routine and as a part of the Riding Martinis. With cousin Rosemary, Norma showcased single trapeze acts in rings 2 and 4. She also was one of the four principal riders who

entertained the crowd while the prop crew was dismantling the steel cage housing Joe Horwath's center-ring lion act.

All this was in addition to Norma's primary role of presenting a trio of elephants in the matinee and five others at night. And, points out Rosemary, she and Norma infrequently donned Native American costumes and makeup to help out Chief Sugar Brown in the wild west concert. Rosemary also refers to the times when she and Norma were the "only white girls" working elephants to pull up stakes during teardown.

Circus fan Jim O'Neill reminisced about his having seen "a good show" the first time Dailey Bros. played Fredericton, New Brunswick, on August 19, 1949. "I was working at

Dobbelsteyn's Electric so didn't see the train arrive," O'Neill recalls. "The calliope paraded downtown, and a banner salesman came into the shop with the result that the boss decided to have Dobbelsteyn Electric [on a banner] on one of the elephants."

Rube Ray, "Heel and Toe Man"

The salesman was most likely Reuben Ray, a veteran clown whom Norma described as the best "heel-and-toe man" on the circus. Ray's assignment on arriving in each town was to put "heel to toe," selling banners to merchants to be placed on elephants (for \$25, as side show performer Ward Hall recalls) and around the interior sidewalls of the big top (for \$10 each). Rube Ray also usually was able to persuade a local florist to donate a bouquet of flowers to be presented to little Norma Davenport during the performances—with a commercial plug from the show announcer, of course. The elephants also were available to be rented out for pre-show events at local auto and farm-implement dealers.

Attesting to Ray's gift of salesmanship, Hall recently told the writer that at least three circus advance men would have already canvassed

the same merchants in an attempt to peddle the day-of-show banners. After Ray covered essentially the same ground, he would return to the lot to have Louie Grabb (who played calliope in the big top, among other duties) paint the additional banners on butcher paper. Both men received small commissions for their efforts.

Prop hand Hurley Carlisle recalled the banners as being "long white strips of paper 8 to 10 feet long. At teardown they simply threw the things out into the back yard and left them on the lot."

In addition to clowning, Ray appeared in a juggling turn with his wife, Lottie, who also trained and presented dogs and ponies. The couple's five daughters--Lottie, Billie, Peggy, Hope and Barbara--were introduced as the Five Rays of Sunshine. Barbara later married bull trainer Rex Williams. Still later, Barbara re-married. She and her new husband, William "Buckles" Woodcock, spent many years presenting elephants on such shows as Ringling Bros. and Big Apple.

The Dailey Bros. partners pretty much relied on each other's demonstrated skills, with Davenport calling the operational shots and Hammill paying close attention to the accounting ledger.

Grift? What Grift?

The "goings-on," on the show included the activities of the grifters. Because of the legal adjusters' efforts to fix each community, law enforcement officers rarely raided the circus privilege car, which contained slot machines and other gambling paraphernalia.

Two concessions managers operated the games in the side show, Ward Hall says. Fred Brad had the "nut mob" or the shell game, and Johnny Stevens the "broad mob," i.e., three-card monte. Never one to consolidate the grift under one boss, Davenport also gave the "outside joint" or "pitching joint" at the front end of the side show banner line to Eddie Allen. Bessie Polk, whom Hall estimated to be 70 years old, had a fourth illicit game on the midway, spin the spindle. "She was such a sweet old lady, but she sure could rob the marks," Hall chuckles.

Ex-Ringling publicist F. Beverly

Kelley, who handled advance press for Dailey, said he was aware of the grift. But, in his 1981 autobiography, *It Was Better Than Work*, Kelley wrote, "I never entered the tent where it took place. This was so that if and when I might be asked if Dailey Brothers Circus was a grift show, I could honestly say that I had never seen any dishonest games."

Side show performers and grifters seldom left the midway to mix with performers in the backyard. By protocol they were forbidden to enter into the big top through the marquee, points out Hall.

On each lot, however, the canvas crew set up a 20 x 20-foot "G-top" which permitted circus folk to socialize and play cards during the few precious moments when they weren't otherwise preoccupied by being generally useful. Employees also could buy beer and whiskey in the G-top from Evelyn Turner, who had the privilege. Evelyn and Jack Turner also ran the pie car on the train. Whenever possible, employees went off the lot to obtain their booze at a cheaper price.

Other behind-the-scenes activities demonstrated the camaraderie among the troupe. (See sidebar at the end of this article written by Gerry Philippus following the 1990 reunion of Dailey Bros. alumni in Sarasota.)

Autry, Rabbit and All

The circus backyard and train provided the backdrops for a series of impromptu hi-jinks, many of them directed at Doug Autry, whose act was described by Canadian fan O'Neill as "not all that interesting to us, certainly not in a class with his brother Gene."

When Autry, then in his late 20s or early 30s, was drinking, which was most of the time, insists Rosemary Stock-Rojas, he could sing "the dirti-

est songs I ever heard--and I have a reputation for a dirty mouth."

In or out of the ring, the handsome young performer needed almost constant shepherding. Ben Davenport outfitted his newest star with the best of Western duds, including boots stitched with "Doug." Autry mounted a silver-dollar saddle atop his horse Lipstick and charged into the arena, with mixed results.

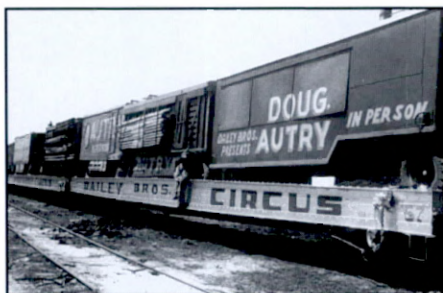
At one performance, remembers Rosemary, the horse and its rider failed to appear when announced. So Bert Rickman hurriedly introduced a dog act and an aerial spectacle. Just as the action was about to begin in and above the rings, the inebriated Autry made his entry, carrying a pet rabbit on his shoulder. In the resulting confusion, the dogs scattered at the sight of Lipstick weaving in and out of the ring, and, Rosemary adds, "not one of us bally broads could get up the web because we were laughing so hard."

At yet another performance, only Lipstick entered the arena. A hurried check of the back yard led workers to Autry. Totally inebriated, the he had attempted to pass between the big-top sidewalls and the stake line, and "he was left hanging on a guy rope," Ms. Rojas chuckles.

"Doug had a serious crush on Norma," even though she was already married to trampoline artist Corky Plunkett, recalls Rosemary. "He was really after Norma. One time he hugged Norma when she had a mouthful of beer, and she spit the beer all over him."

On several occasions Ben had to intervene when his daughter and her two companions played tricks on the gullible Autry. Gerry Riley, one of the tricksters, tells of the incident when the three hoisted Doug's shiny boots to the top of the men's dressing tent, well out of the singer's reach. Autry was literally in tears as he reported his predicament to Davenport, who charged into the women's dressing area and shouted, "Come on, girls, I know who did that."

Rosemary particularly relishes sharing the jackpot about a scheme that backfired in more ways than one. While the train was on a siding during the late-night load-out, Norma and Rosemary pounded on Autry's stateroom door. The star



jumped to his feet to answer the knock. Simultaneously, co-conspirator and prop boss Oscar Dennis shoved a lighted firecracker from the adjacent stateroom through a crack beneath the compartment wall.

The exploding cracker sent the startled Autry's pet rabbit on his shoulder diving through the sleeper window. Though he was not injured, the panicked performer refused to return to the train. Instead, he hired a cab to make the jump and charged the \$300 fare to the show.

Davenport's punishment for the prank was to dock the three girls' pay for the entire taxi fare.

Ben's Word was Law

Though many felt Davenport's quick temper, Ms. Riley recalls that "everybody on the show felt comfortable with Ben. You do your job and you're OK." Davenport and his legal adjusters were always on hand to spring any crewman or performer who landed in jail for some minor offense. But Mrs. Riley also remembers "wild man" Davenport admonishing working men that if they molested a child or raped a girl, he would see that they not only go to jail, but he would make sure that the sons of bitches go to the death chamber. He also warned against drug use on the show.

Rosemary Stock-Rojas recalls her Aunt Eva receiving equal respect from the 400 employees. When necessary, Mrs. Davenport was even known to brutally break up a fight among black workingmen in their sleeper. "They were terrified of her," says Norma's cousin. "But when they were sick, she would go down there and take care of them until they got back on their feet."

Dailey Bros. people reciprocated the owners, loyalty. For example, says Ms. Riley, "tax people" sometimes showed up unexpectedly, demanding an audience with the cop-shy Davenport. A circus manager leading the unwelcome visitors around the lot would ask employees, "Have you

boys seen Ben?" That, says Ms. Riley, was the signal for Davenport to blend in with the working men. Often the inspectors would give up when the eventual response was "Mr. Davenport doesn't seem to be here today, but maybe you can catch him at the next town."

According to circus historian Phillips, trains pulling the Dailey show crossed Canada twice, showing both Victoria on Vancouver Island and Glace Bay, Nova Scotia, where the coal mines ran far out beneath the Atlantic. In all, the Canadian tour lasted 92 days, in which the circus appeared in 70-odd towns and ran off some 10,000 Canadian rail miles.

Bad Call for the 1950 Tour

Flush from the financial success of the 1949 Canadian tour, the ledger-oriented Hammill immediately began chomping at the bit to replay the same route in 1950. Davenport protested his partner's impulsive determination to return to his home country. As Norma pointed out a half century later, the resulting series of arguments wasn't about the money needed to finance the tour. Rather, she insists, her father instinctively knew that returning to the same towns was a recipe for disaster.

"My dad told [Hammill], 'You cannot repeat, especially when you had a big season. Because people get

Joe Louis posed with the girls on the show. Pfening Archives.

pushed around; they can't find a good seat, they're mad. If you had crowds as big as we did, then they remember that more than a bad show."

Yet, lacking Eva's counsel, Ben finally gave in. Ironically, Eva returned to the circus for the 1950 tour, though she would not share living quarters on the train with her estranged husband.

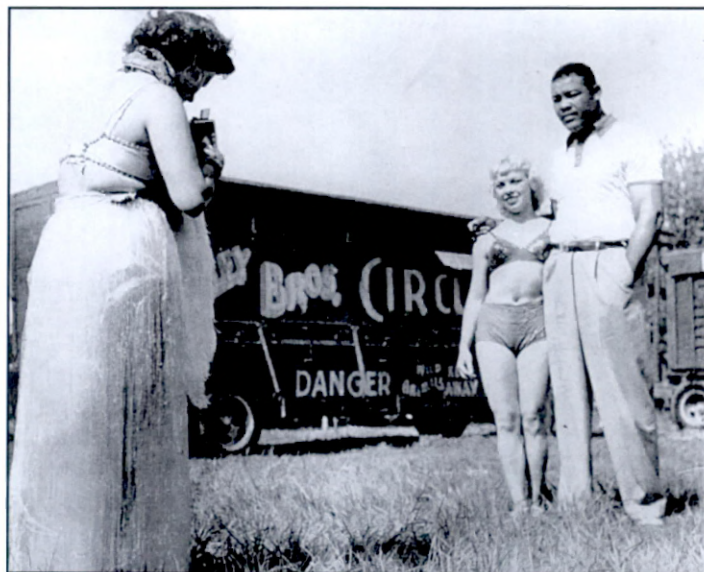
Human cannonball Hugo Zacchini was the key addition to the show's performance roster that final season. Zacchini had closed a series of dates with the Cetlin & Wilson Carnival in Texas and joined Dailey Bros. in winter quarters. Asked how her father obtained the famed artist's services, Norma replied simply, "I guess he needed a job."

As the season proceeded, Norma heard her father joke to Zacchini: "If you keep getting your cannon closer to the net, all you'll have to do is jump off the end of the barrel into the net, Hugo."

The show gained a new announcer when Paul Nelson came over from Cole Bros. with his wife, equestrian star Jinx Adams, who managed the reins of a 16-horse hitch around the hippodrome track. Norma notes that the "rowdy" Nelson also brought along two other showgirls who "he had fooled around with" on the Cole show. Nelson and his entourage did not last the season.

The 1950 line-up also featured Manuel Barragon's cloud swings; and the Konselman polar bears, acquired by Davenport and presented by Capt. Emil Sweyer and Raymond "Dog Red" Freivogel. Rex Williams captured the audience's attention by displaying a tiger riding an elephant.

Norma continued to perform on the trampoline with Rosemary as her partner. The Davenport daughter's marriage to Corky Plunket had ended in divorce at the end of the 1949 season. Norma says their parting was amicable. "We were just too young when we got married," she reasons. After



leaving Dailey Bros., Plunkett subsequently married June Brunk, a member of a touring repertoire family. Corky and June returned to work for Davenport on several of his street shows during the 1950s. Norma and Corky remained friends until his death in the late 1990s.

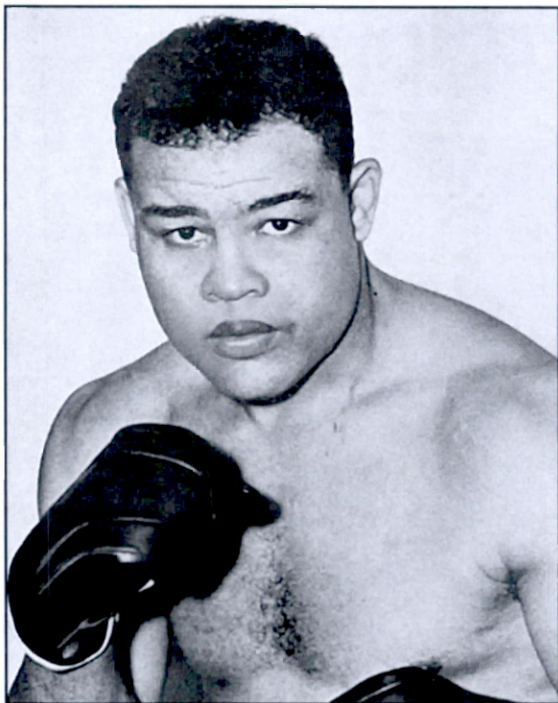
Noticeably missing from the side show bally platform was Ward Hall, who says he had made so much money from his inside pitches during the previous year's Canadian tour that he discovered he was earning more than the featured star in the big-top show. Hall says he declined side show manager Milt Robbins's offer to return for the 1950 season, sensing that repeating the same route would be a mistake. His assessment turned out to be correct.

"Here Comes the Bride," and Joe Louis

As the circus train prepared to re-enter Canada, two significant events on occurred at Port Huron, Michigan: a wedding reception and the boarding of a legendary boxer.

Norma married Pete Cristiani on May 25, 1950. The couple exchanged vows before a justice of the peace between shows at Port Huron and returned to the lot to share numer-

Joe Louis as pictured in the Dailey program. Pfening Archives.



youngest of the Cristiani sons had left his renowned equestrian family to manage the Dailey Bros. pie car at the start of the 1950 season. Norma met Pete prior to the 1949 season when Cristiani was negotiating the purchase of several camels from her father at winter quarters. Later that year Norma saw Pete announcing on the King Bros. show where his brothers and sisters performed and where he managed concessions. Almost simultaneously with Pete's move to Dailey Bros., Jean Allen, one of Norma's trainers who had the cotton-candy stand on the Dailey midway, left the show after seven



Joe Louis and Ben Davenport. Pfening Archives.

ous Champaign toasts with their cohorts under the big top. The

years to take up concession chores on King Bros.

Retired heavyweight boxing champ Joe Louis stepped aboard the Dailey train at Port Huron for the border crossing. Louis, born Joe Louis Barrow to a family of cotton pickers in Alabama in 1914, earned millions defending his heavyweight crown, but he owed a substantial amount of back taxes, interest and penalties to the IRS. Presumably, the money he was paid for the Canadian circus stint would be exempt from American taxation.

Louis took over the family car, which had been repainted with his name in large letters before the circus train left winter quarters.



Joe Louis private car. Pfening Archives.

Cardboard signs on the train along its U.S. route pointed out that the champ was not with the show at that time. The fighter brought along an entourage, including a "gorgeous model" who shared his private facilities. Norma notes that even though the celebrity was being well paid for his circus gig, Louis played on his newly established friendship with her father to seek additional loans to fund his partying lifestyle.

At each performance the "Brown Bomber" bowed to enthusiastic crowds, encouraging them to stay for the after show where Louis comically refereed stage-managed wrestling matches. The popular pugilist also willingly submitted to numerous requests by fans and performers alike to pose for photos.

After staying on the show only two



The Hugo Zacchini cannon on the 1950 train. Pfening Archives.

weeks, Louis left to train for an out-of-retirement bout with the current heavyweight champ, Ezzard "the Cincinnati Cobra" Charles. Even though Louis had drawn circus patrons well, his contracted fee drove up the show's nut at a time of overall declining attendance.

Honey, I Shrunk the Circus

"When Dailey Bros. returned to Fredericton on June 28, 1950," fan James O'Neill later recounted, "rumours had preceded it that the show was on the downhill." Turned off by being shoehorned into the big top and mindful of the grift they had encountered during the previous season, Canadians stayed away in droves. Another factor affecting circus attendance throughout North America may have been the outbreak of the Korean conflict in June. The undeclared "police action" was not popular north of the border. Other American circuses were feeling the pinch as well. Following a spotty, 15-week run, the Chicago Stadium Corporation-owned Cole Bros. folded its tents on August 5 at Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania.

On that same day the Dailey Bros. train completed its equally disappointing two-month Canadian route, re-entering the United States at Sault Ste. Marie. With the demise of the Cole show, Dailey Bros. was now undeniably the second largest circus, behind the Greatest Show on Earth.

The bragging rights were shallow, as the Texas-based five-ringer was forced to cut back in all areas, including the all-important advance. *Billboard* noted that ex-Dailey personnel were showing up on other circus lots. Ironically, the venerable

show-biz bible halted its extensive coverage of circus activities during this time. When the trade journal abandoned its folksy "Dressing Room" column in mid-August, readers were no longer able to keep up with equestrian Hazel King's steady stream of gossip from Dailey Bros. lots.

Norma recalls her father having to inform Hugo Zacchini that he was no longer able to afford the top performer's salary. "We didn't have any business," Norma explains. "But dad told him, 'You can run the pie car.' So Hugo loved that, running the food in the pie car. Hugo and his wife Elsa were nice people. And, oh my God, they were funny."

As if the attrition of performers and workers due to missed paydays were not bad enough, Harry Hammill was responsible for other employees blowing the show, Norma laments. "He ran a lot of good people away. They didn't like him. But when my dad lost general agent R.

M. Harvey that was quite a blow to him, because he had been with dad quite a few years.

The Show Must Go On

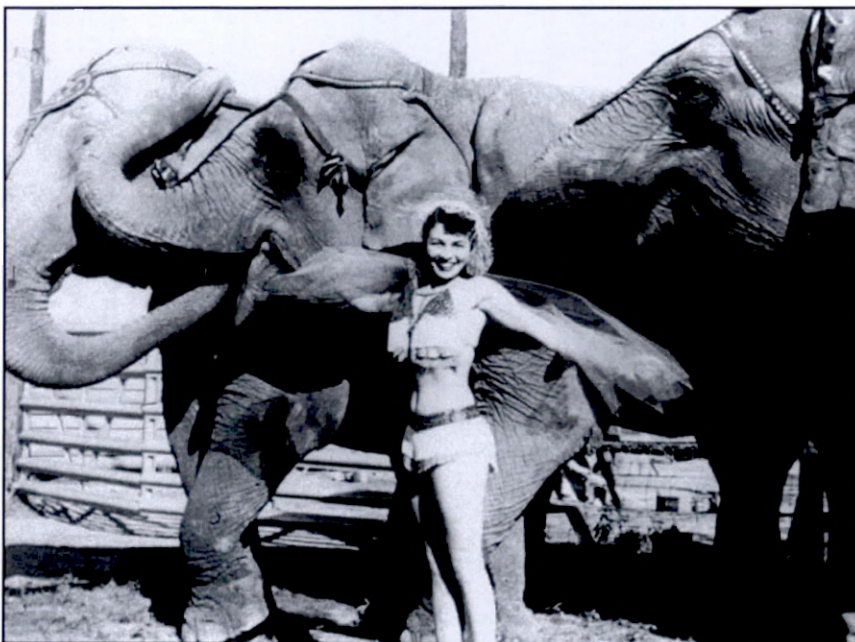
In a series of interviews in 2008, Ms. Cristiani revealed that, despite the growing acrimony between her father and Hammill, she remained optimistic about the show's future. She maintains that overall morale among employees continued to be high, even as their numbers dwindled.

Circus fan Howard Roscoe, who had written effusively about Dailey Bros. when he first saw the show on rails in Wisconsin in 1944, penned a stark contrast six years later when Dailey Bros. appeared in his hometown Menominee on August 14.

"At the matinee, Eva Davenport bravely played an organ, but the strident tones of a loud, brassy circus band were sadly missed," Roscoe bemoaned in his 1989 *White Tops* account. "Several of the wild animal acts listed in the 25-cent program did not appear during a stripped down performance."

Two days later, at Antigo, Wisconsin, lawmen raided the Dailey Bros. pie car and hauled off gambling paraphernalia. Fortunately, notes Norma, husband Pete Cristiani had cleaned out the slot machines

Gerry Philippus and her elephants. Norma Cristiani collection.



the night before, leaving the cops virtually none of the illicit take. *Billboard* reported that the show was sued for \$50,000 and briefly attached at Marshalltown, Iowa.

Most fans remained unaware of the show's troubles. As the circus train continued its heartland trek, newspaper ads assured circus-goers they would see "Hugo Zachinni shot from a huge cannon entire length of world's longest big top" and the "Elephant Ballet, 25 ponderous pachyderms in sensational terpsichorean novelty presented by Rex Williams and featuring Norma Davenport."

"Today was circus day in Ames," reported the Ames, Iowa, *Tribune*, "and [Dailey Bros.] moved in on the city with clock-like precision, established a beachhead and found the natives friendly."

"After being unloaded from rail cars, circus elephants paraded north on Kellogg toward the performance area just outside of town. This noon near the Allen Motor Company a herd of elephants performed for a large crowd of on-lookers."

"Strings of automobiles lined both sides of North Grand as the spectators toured the 15 acres of grounds. Many of the spectators were farmers."

The spieler of the side show housing the big gorilla was assuring the crowd that "these bars are so strong

that a General Sherman tank couldn't break through." He managed to leave the delightful hint that maybe the gorilla could, though.

A circus press release assured readers of the *Tribune* that "no gambling devices are carried by the show." Despite the article's claim that Dailey Bros. was "America's fastest-growing circus," the reality was far different as more workers and more performers dropped by the wayside.

No Hope Beyond Hope

As the downsized circus limped into Arkansas, the big-top canvas crew set up only the sidewalls on several rain-soaked lots. Like Joe Blitzfig of the then-popular "Li'l Abner" comic strip, Dailey Bros. was traveling under an increasingly dark cloud.

Norma Cristiani, Gerry Philippus Riley and Rosemary Stock Rojas. Author's photo.

When the train reached Hope, Arkansas, the feuding partners huddled over the show's fate. At that point, the circus could either com-



The Dailey ticket wagon with Joe Louis name. Pfening Archives.

plete the 16 dates to end the season in Mississippi or reroute the train directly to Gonzales. As Norma remembers, "My dad asked Hammill, 'What do you want to do?' And he said, 'I'm not going to come up with more money.'"

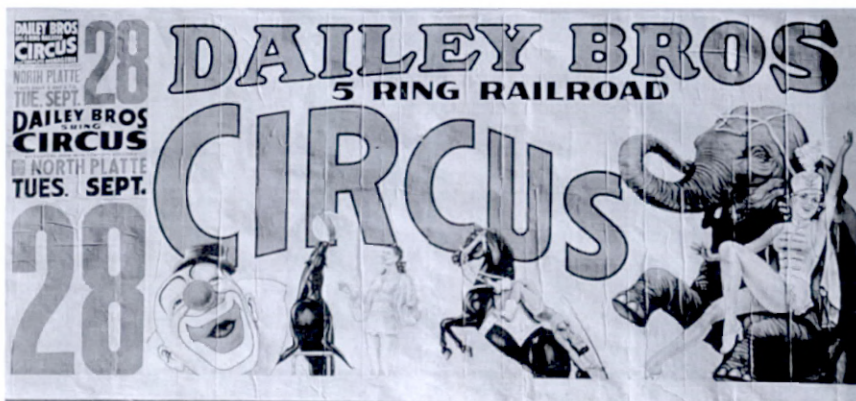
"Weary--and wary," Norma and other performers completed the night show at Hope on September 21, 1950, then pitched in to help tear down the Dailey Bros. Circus big top for the final time.

Even as she boarded the 25-car train on the following day for the earlier-than-planned home run to winter quarters in Central Texas, Norma admits she was still in denial as the circus train pulled into Gonzales for the final time on September 25. She wanted to believe that Dailey Bros. would be back on the rails for the 1951 season. Alas, it was not to be.

As bad as things appeared, the circus reportedly lost \$93,000 during the disastrous 1950 season, Norma says her dad boasted of having squirreled away a quarter of a million dollars. Most of it came from the hefty profits that Davenport had realized from the 1949 tour, she explains.

The strained relationship between the partners would finally snap at the alleged theft of Hammill's money that resulted in a bitter court battle several years later.





A Dailey billboard. Pfening Archives.

Tears, Tears Everywhere

Almost as a footnote to the confusion which surrounded the return of the circus train to winter quarters, another train left soon afterward carrying the troupe of Mexican performers back to their native country. Rosemary Stock was among the passengers, having fallen in love with unicyclist Mario Rojas, whom she later married.

Because of a significant event occurring on September 27, the long awaited match between Joe Louis and Ezzard Charles, Rosemary remembers the day that the performers arrived back in Mexico City. A radio inside the train station was broadcasting the 15-round championship fight from New York City. The ex-Dailey performers wailed loudly when they heard that their old buddy on the show had lost on points.

Rosemary cut short her Mexico City visit, returning to Gonzales to perform with cousin Norma at a series of previously booked Texas Shrine circus dates.

Ben Davenport had given his daughter five elephants--Mary, Norma, Conti, Maud and Bessie--as a post-season wedding gift. In addition to working the elephants at Houston and Dallas, Norma was pressed into improvising a last-minute act, a trampoline number with Rosemary and a male artist with whom they had never performed.

Rosemary also was on hand in October 1950 when Norma and Pete left Gonzales to join the Cristiani family on the King show. As the couple drove their bull truck out of win-

ter quarters, the rough-and-tumble circus owner waved goodbye.

More than 60 years later, Rosemary recalls the scene: "Ben cried."

Next: Norma and Pete Cristiani start their own family and, eventually, their own circus.

The author gratefully acknowledges the contributions of Norma and Pete Cristiani, Rosemary Stock-Rojas, Gerry Phillipus Riley and Ward Hall, who consented to lengthy interviews and who checked the writer's information. Also helpful were articles from the archives of the Gonzales, Texas *Inquirer*; Ames, Iowa *Tribune*; *Billboard*, *Bandwagon* and *White Tops*, as well as the Sideshow World blog. Buckles Woodcock helped with the names of elephants.

Author's Note:

In her early teen years in the 1940s, Gerry Phillipus was a classmate of Norma Davenport's at the Gonzales, Texas, junior high school. After Gerry turned 18, she joined Norma on Dailey Bros. Circus at winter quarters in early 1948. Learning the Spanish web, she took pride in being a "bally broad." Gerry, Norma and Norma's cousin, Rosemary Stock, became inseparable friends. Their partying habits earned them the nickname "the Three Musky Beers" among show people. Gerry later worked for Ben Davenport on his other shows. As one of a diminishing band of ex-troupers who attended a Dailey Bros. reunion in 1990 in Sarasota, Ms. Phillipus penned the following remembrance of the good old days. Norma Davenport Cristiani, Ward Hall and Ms. Phillipus recently supplied the last names--shown in ital-

ics-- for many of the performers and workers listed in Gerry's reverie.

Here it is: Youth is such a wonderful thing and holds dear memories for everyone, but being a "Punk" on the Dailey Show was so very special! And when we open our storehouse of memories our thoughts are happy in remembering and reminiscing.

In 1947, Ben and Eva Davenport imported 7 baby elephants from India. In 1948, they imported 11 baby elephants from India.

On the cold and wintery morning of January 8, 1948, Ben, Smokey Jones and Streamline Frizzell left the Gonzales winter quarters for Boston for the arrival of the baby bulls. The unloading of the *Irish Bank*, the ship they came over on, came in on a snowy day. I can imagine Smokey's thoughts as he stood by Ben on that cold and frosty morning on that Boston dock waiting. Smokey never dreamed that someday he would be one of the most knowledgeable elephant trainers today. Louis Reed was his tutor; he did his homework and learned his lessons well. When the bulls were to be unloaded, Smokey said Ben hired a steam engine to warm the baggage car for their arrival. Baby Butch was among this shipment and this started Singh on his career as "The Great Hindu." Also arriving with this shipment were 200 monkeys and many python snakes.

More of our precious memories: The cold, wintery nights in the ring barn--Ed Martin teaching us to ride bare back. Larry Carden, Norma Davenport, Rosemary Stock, Donna Dee Pyle, Hope Ray and myself, thrills, chills and a lot of spills. Hazel King, Duke Keller by her side, teaching us to ride ménage horses. It wasn't "Can you learn," it was you will learn to ride.

Norma's birthday in January, a big party, elephants on picket line, bull hands clean the bull barn (our party room) for the gala affair. What a fun time, everyone joins in. Ben and Eva were proud of the youngest elephant trainer in the world, "Little Miss Norma."

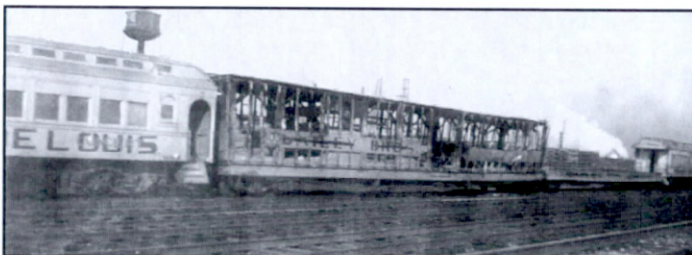
Cookhouse Charlie's pancakes in the cook house in the winter quarters, and lima bean soup. The wonderful nights playing cards in the bull barn by a pot-bellied stove. The



Dailey coaches in scrap yard in East St. Louis, Illinois in January 1951. Pfening Archives.

elephants line the wall trumpeting, monkeys screeching, the famous monkey cage, such beautiful memories.

Then came spring and the smell of fresh green grass and paint. Willie



Burned Dailey stock car in scrap yard in East St. Louis, Illinois in January 1951. Pfening Archives.

Rawls busy painting, everyone hard at work practicing. Cloud swing and webs were hung--this meant "Bally Broads" report to Eve (as Eva was affectionately called by many). Hope Ray, Barbara Ray, Rosemary



Dailey stock car in scrap yard in East St. Louis, Illinois in January 1951. Pfening Archives.

Stock, Norma and myself. Sore muscles, aches, pains and sore ankles from practice. Oh, the sheer joy of being a Dailey Show Broad.

Rex Williams, Smokey Jones, Little

George Williams (Rex Williams's brother), Arumai Singh, Sweetpea, Pete Pairu, Narrowgauge and Hungry (Price Dennis, brother of prop boss Oscar Dennis) working out the bull acts. Louie Reed raising his gruff voice at their first mistake. He wanted a job well done and he got just that.

Blackie O'Malley and the candy butchers, Frank Smith, Red Gates, Stanley Pollock, Camel Rider Nordeen and Hollywood arriving from Los Angeles.

Everyone busy taking things to the train, packing trunks, painting your name on your water buckets. Opening day in Gonzales, rain, rain, rain.

The Sunday runs in Canada, listening to the sounds of the humming railroad tracks and the old steam engine. The train's whistle blowing sounds like a lost soul crying in the middle of the night. Eating soup and chili in the pie car. Mickies, 50 cents; jukebox playing My Happiness. [A "Mickie," Gerry explains, was a tiny bottle of whiskey about the length of a man's index finger and about two fingers wide, sold by Evelyn Turner and her husband Jack in the pie car. Ms. Cristiani simply calls the container "a medicine bottle."]

Muddy show lots. A voice coming through the pie car "Ben wants everyone back on the lot to help get the show down and loaded." Back

we go on Mona's gilley [Mona Frizzell, wife of trainmaster Frank "Stream-line" Frizzell, drove the station wagon which ferried circus performers to and from each lot] to help tear down. No Prima Donnas on this show.

Mud up to your ankles. Ben's pant legs rolled up, working an elephant along side of Smokey, and Rex pulling wagons out of the mud and off the lot. The lovely show girl you just saw two hours ago in sequins and feathers is now the one working an elephant in harness and pulling big top stakes with mud up to her "keister."

Next night, good grassy lot today. Everyone happy sitting on the railroad track singing with Doug Autry, We're Back in the Saddle Again and Mona Lisa. Ben's voice comes across the loudest, "Load up, the train is leaving and we are about to leave for tomorrow's date [town]." The bull hands have loaded the bulls. Coal cinders in our hair and clothes; "oh well, tomorrow's lot will be grassy and if I'm lucky, I will have a full bucket of water to wash away the coal cinders in my hair."

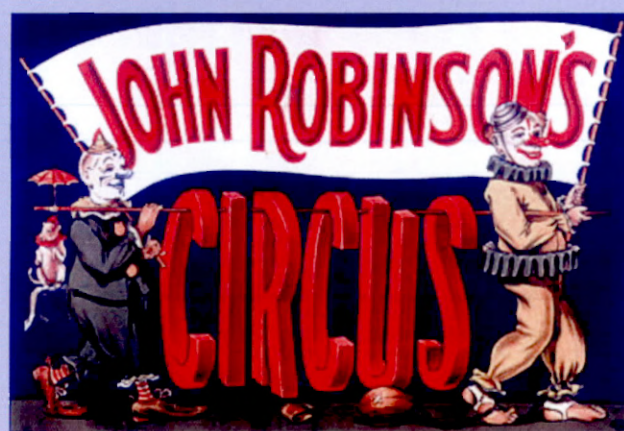
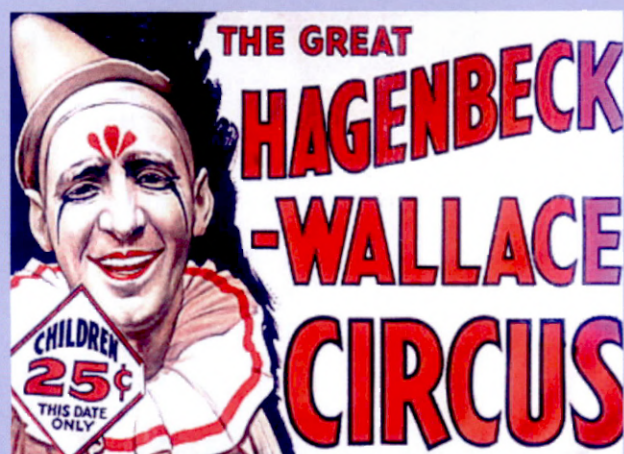
Yes, this was our way of life with the Daily (sic) Show, and yes, this is what our reunion is all about. Ben Davenport (as an independent owner) owned more elephants at that time than anyone in the circus business. "The Wild Man," but what security we all felt on his show. And as Norma said, "What a wonderful way to honor my mom and dad," paying respect and showing our love at their graveside.

In closing, I feel sure that never before have any show owners had such an honor as Ben and Eva Davenport to be remembered with such sincerity and love after 45 and 50 years. As Bobby Gibbs phrased it, "As we all stood there in the warm Florida sun standing around their graves and shed our tears, thinking back what a privilege to have been a part of their lives and our Great Dailey Show.

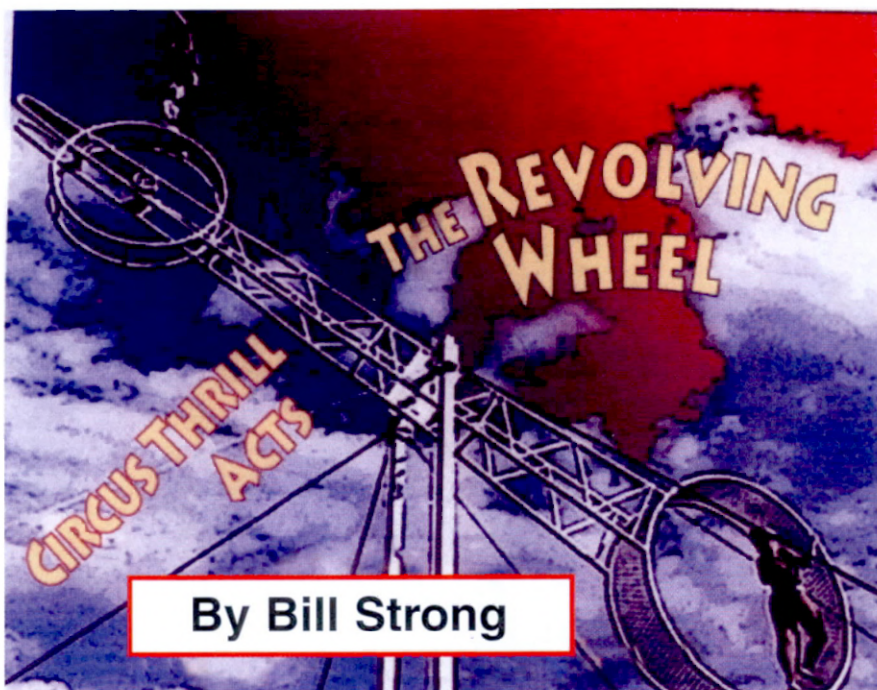
Yes, Duke Keller, we are family and our strong bond remains unbroken. Rest in peace, and Ben "I know you've hit the Red One." We love you, Gerry Philipppus Riley. February 27, 1991

Circus Clown Posters

As long as there been circuses there have been clowns. This selection of posters is from The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Tibbles Digital Collection.







By Bill Strong

We seem to have a bad habit of twisting the words from Webster's dictionary to fit whatever we wish; such is the case with the word "wheel." I'm not sure when "the" wheel was invented; perhaps no one knows for sure. We do know that it was reinvented in 1949 by Clay Beckett at the age of 57. Beckett filed for a patent on November 1, 1949 for an "Occupant Propelled Amusement Device." In legalize it read, "An acrobatic device comprising a beam pivotally mounted for rotation in a vertical plane about a transverse axis thereof, a pair of spaced parallel rings secured to each end of the beam, said rings being disposed in vertical planes parallel to the plane of rotation of the beam and being fixed against movement relative to the beam, horizontal cross struts between each pair of rings and rigidly connecting said rings together, said struts being disposed at spaced intervals about the rings, a circular band disposed between the rings of each pair, said band being interwoven with said struts to serve as a continuous walkway for an acrobat on both the exterior and interior of the rings."

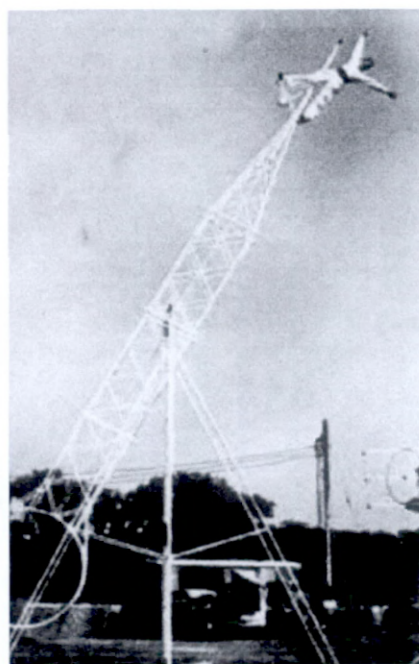
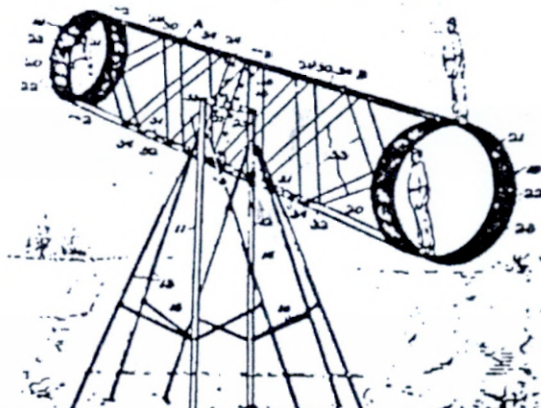
In an advertising flyer

Beckett stated, "The Phenomenal Clay Beckett, on the world's only self-propelled loop swing.

"Here is certainly one of the most unusual performances of our age. The apparatus, developed by Mr. Beckett, is the final result of a series on inventions starting with a 10-foot high model to the present giant, which has a diameter of 60-feet. To attempt to describe Beckett's mad movements aboard this whirling monster is futile, but they include running, leaping, rope skipping and

Clay Beckett's 1949 patent.

2,643,122
OCCUPANT PROPELLED AMUSEMENT
DEVICE
Clay C. Beckett, Washington, D. C.
Application November 1, 1949, Serial No. 124,745
3 Claims. (CL 272-33)



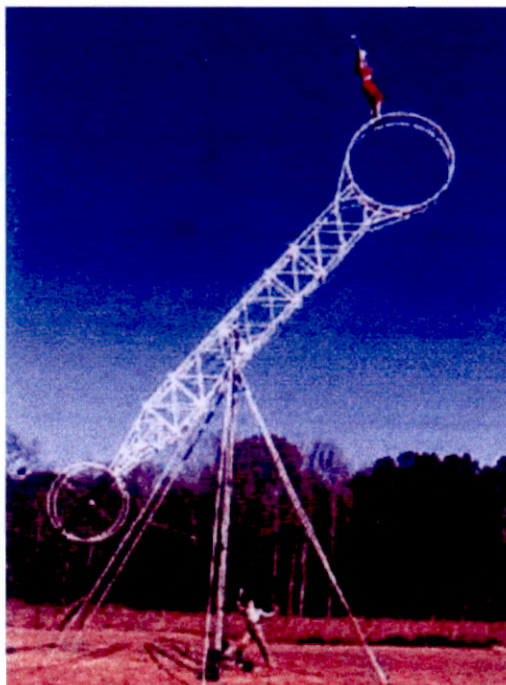
Clay Beckett on his original space wheel.

dancing on the outside of the loop, feigned falls and an incredible bit of balancing while blind folded. The daring of this man has been described by viewers as the most breath-taking ever seen."

Beckett not only invented it, he performed tricks on it as a daredevil attraction called "The Giant Loop Swing." Clay originally built the wheel with two cages, but after no success in finding a partner for the other wheel, he removed the cage and added the rim. As the Great Beckett he advertised his aerial act in the *Billboard* with the Barnes-Carruthers agency as the contact. He retired from performing in 1961.

At this point in our story another man enters the picture who would play a significant role in the history of space wheels and who would perform on a wheel for nearly forty years.

Leigh Heisinger worked with Beckett and practiced on the apparatus. Heisinger purchased Beckett's original wheel. As a student at Florida



Leigh Heisinger.

State University Heisinger was active in the college's Flying High Circus. He even borrowed it for performances at FSU, where he continued his studies in the field of physical education.

In late 1960, half way through his senior year, the opportunity arose to go to South America with the Ringling-Barnum show for a 14-week tour. In the meanwhile he met Nancy Harrison, a fellow student. Nancy went with him to Brazil, working as a ballet girl in the show.

After buying Beckett's space wheel he renamed it, "The Loop Swing of Death," but he wasn't satisfied with that name and re-named it "The Giant Space Wheel."

In 1962 Leigh added his wife Nancy to the act, naming it The Sensational Leighs. Both Leigh and Nancy were injured while performing, the worst incident being a concussion Nancy received in January 1964 when she inadvertently crossed in front of the rigging as Leigh was performing his final "run in space." As a result she spent four days in a North Carolina hospital. From that point on both wore headgear.

Leigh and Nancy took the wheel to Europe, being the first act of its kind there, a move that came back to haunt them when the Hamid-Morton

Circus imported a wheel act from Germany. Apparently, someone copied Heisinger's wheel while it was in Europe. This was the second wheel in America.

The couple divorced in April of 1985. Their daughter Robin continued the act for another fifteen years, playing in Europe and the United States.

In 1965 the Leighs appeared on the Ed Sullivan television program. In 1967 the act performed before 189,000 people during a nine-day engagement at the Calgary Stampede.

Leigh's retired at the end of the 2000 season. Over the years both

Leigh and Robin fell from the wheel. Heisinger performed on the wheel longer than any other performer.

Beckett built his second wheel in 1960. It was purchased in 1963 by Hennie Luxom, who went by the name Celeste in her aerial rocket act. Johnny Luxom, her nephew, presented the wheel in performance, calling it the Wheel of Destiny. Clay Beckett died at age 77 on February 4, 1971.

In 1966 or 1967 the Luxoms had a disagreement and she reclaimed the wheel, selling it to Madeline and Renee Geraldo, who at one time worked it as Batman and Robin, calling it the Big Wheel. Later they painted it in bright florescent colors and worked in black light. From November 14-17, 1968 the Geraldos appeared in the Tom Packs Circus along with the Sensational Leighs in Wichita, Kansas.

Johnny Luxom was no dummy. He had taken all the wheel's measurements while it was in his possession, and had a new wheel fabricated. This was the fourth one in North America.

Elvin Bale is sometimes known as World's Greatest Daredevil. Born in London,

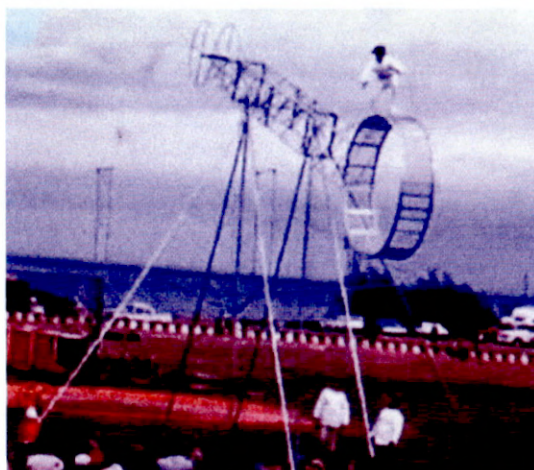


Leigh Heisinger and Robin.

England, he came with his family to the United States in the early 1950s. In the early 1960s he began his signature act on the single trapeze.

In 1969 Bale introduced his space wheel on the Ringling-Barnum Blue unit. He designed a three story high wheel. The complicated revolving girder with a fixed wheel had a cage on one end. While the device rotated on its axis, Bale maintained his bal-

Johnny Luxom.





Renee and Madeline Geraldo.

ance as he tumbled inside or walked on the outside. The 8-foot diameter steel-mesh wheel was mounted on the end of a 38-foot steel arm suspended from the ceiling.

He took the space wheel to a new level, doing somersaults, sometimes blindfolded, sometimes with a man



Freddie Bovill's split wheel.

standing on his shoulders. He later presented it in 1979 on Ringling's Monte Carlo Circus and received a Silver Clown award at Monaco's Circus Festival.

In 1970 Freddie Bovill, a trapeze artist, left South Africa for Europe. He later formed his own act as the Flying Germans. Some years later he built and introduced what he called the world's first Double Wheel of Death with two people having to

work very closely together in order to balance and control the apparatus. Unfortunately there were two serious accidents soon after its design. Because of the injuries, the wheel was placed in storage for a number of years.

Bovill reintroduced the tandem wheel in the late 1970s, using a new name, The Wheel of Death. The act was later expanded, using four people. Our records indicate this was the first double space wheel. The act never appeared in the United States.

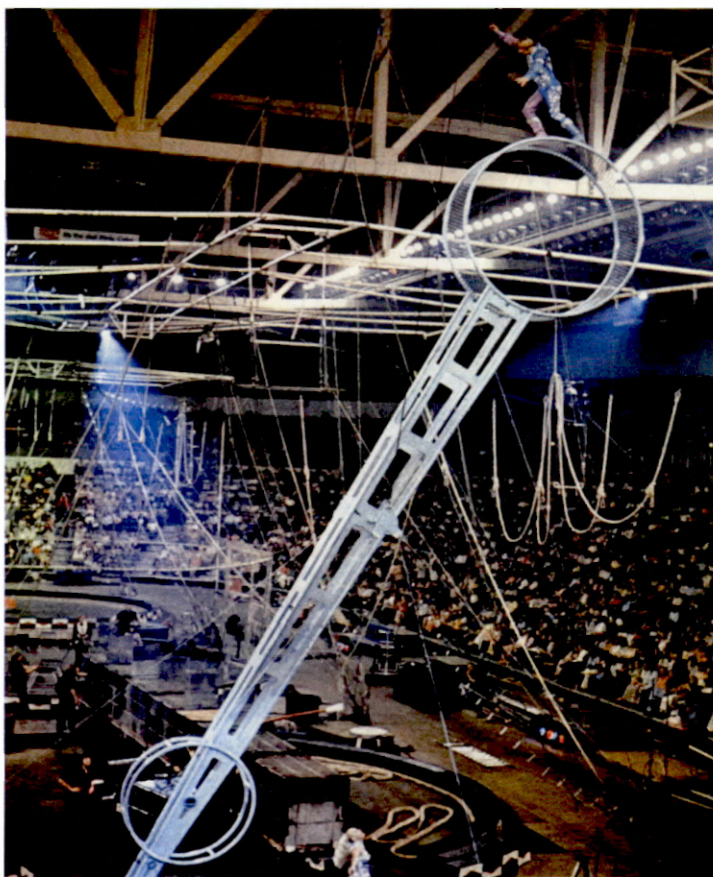
In 1976 Serge and George Coronas debuted



Serge and George Coronas in 1980.

Barnum. The second year they added a two tigers to the act, which, needless to say, was a first. The Peters's act was presented as the Wheel of Death. A review stated, "Their act was exciting, with the brothers counterbalancing each other in huge treadmills at the ends of a revolving girder, with two Bengal tigers joining them for the opening spins. After ditching the tigers, the brothers got serious about defying death, with Marco racing between two lines

Elvin Bale.



their wheel. In 1980 the Coronas worked on two separate wheel riggings.

In 1986 Marco and Philip Peters brought back the double cage on Ringling-



Leo Garcia.

of fire and Phillip diving 40-feet from the top of the wheel."

About this time, wheels started coming from everywhere, in every size, shape and design. Martin Espana added trapeze bar extended out from the center, making it a four person act. Leigh Heisinger recalls a wheel with three cages, and some families have more than one wheel.

Leo Garcia's Wheel of Destiny

Crazy Wilson.



worked on a 30-foot pendulum. His wheel, when assembled, is close to 50-feet tall at its apex. Garcia's wheel was designed to easily be rolled in and out of arenas in less than one minute, as it sits on its own hydraulic base.

Jose Cole's website described Garcia's wheel as, "The Amazing Garcia performed different tricks inside the wheel, such as somersaults and juggling fire torches. While walking on the outside of the wheel he performed stunts like jumping rope. In his finale stunt he pushed himself away from the wheel just after it had gone past its apex to catch the outside edges as it rotated past him while in mid-air."

Unfortunately he was injured at Busch Stadium when he fell off the wheel when it was at its highest. His injuries were so severe that he was hospitalized for over eighteen months and was in rehabilitation for over two years. His father was one of the first to present and perform the act in the 1970s. In recent years he has appeared with Royal Hanneford, Billy Martin and Jose Cole.

Oscar Garcia performed on his wheel as a feature on his Star Family Circus. Jamie Garcia's two sons worked a wheel on Garcia Bros. Circus.

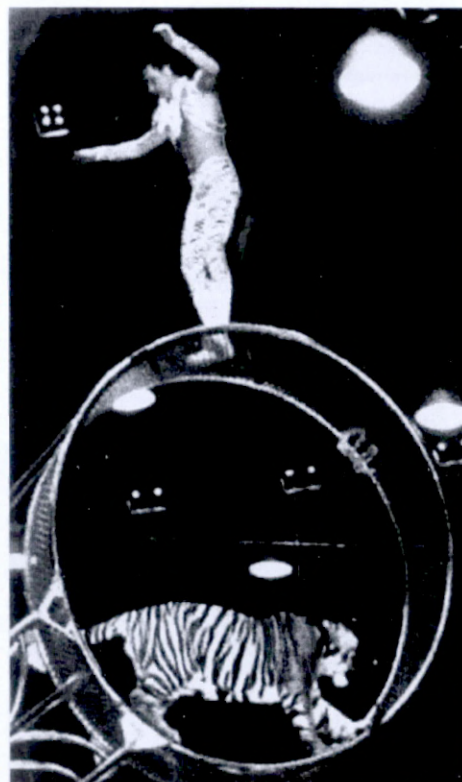
In 1964 the Lemoine family arrived in America from Germany. They worked a space wheel in the 1980s. After performing the routine for twenty-five years daughter Michele retired from the act.

In 1986 Karl Winn put his wheel act together. He had a daring and spectacular finish in which he jumped off the outer diameter of the wheel while it was at its apex. About this time, the Ibarra family also had a wheel as a second act to their flying trapeze routine. They performed at Circus World Museum for a couple of seasons.

In 1993 Ivan and Noe Espana presented a space wheel on Ringling-Barnum. The show program noted, "The incredible Espanas attack the spinning steel contraption, doing handstands and back flips, skipping rope and even performing blindfolded, rotating as high as 40-feet above the floor."

In 1994 Bryan Donaldson worked a double wheel with a partner in England. The act was in the Blackpool Christmas Circus that year.

In 1997 Beatty-Cole featured Danny and Juan Rodriguez on a double wheel. In 2002 that show presented the Dotsenko troupe on the big wheel. Rodrigo Fernandez worked a wheel on Cole Bros. in 2004. A performer dressed as



Philip Peters with his tiger.

Spiderman presented a wheel act on Cole Bros. in 2006.

Big wheel acts were not as popular in Europe; however, the Alexander brothers presented a double wheel on Germany's Circus Krone in 1998. Joseph Dominic Bauer worked on 50-foot Wheel of Thrills on Atlantic City's Boardwalk during the summer of 2000.

In 2001 Carson & Barnes presented two double wheels, Enrique and Rosa Marie Boccardo on one, and Manuel and Maritza on the other. The Ferandes family of four had a large double wheel on Carson & Barnes in 2006, 2007 and 2008.

In 2003 and 2004 the Olivares Duo had a wheel on Kelly-Miller. That



Spiderman on Cole Bros. in 2006.

show featured the Rosales Family on a double wheel in 2007 and 2008.

From 2002 to 2005 and again in 2008 aerialist "Crazy" Wilson Dominguez, performed the wheel with Ringling-Barnum. A circus press release said, "How does a man earn 'Crazy' as a professional moniker? Is it by tempting fate daily, attempting

a running somersaults atop the gyroscopic, 42-foot tall Pendulum of Pandemonium? Or manning a turbo bike during Motorcycle Mania, in which man and machine are placed mere inches from mortal mayhem?

"A fourth generation circus performer born in Los Teques, Venezuela, 'Crazy' Wilson Dominguez puts a world-class daredevil's spin on several traditional circus acts. 'You need to make something nobody has ever made before. You need to create it,' and



The Rosales Family on Kelly-Miller. John Wells photo.



The Alexander brothers on Krone in 1998.

a never-before-seen trampoline leaps in the middle of a high wire? Or

Bryan and Nev Donaldson 1994.



Hans Winn on Garden Bros. Circus. John Wells photo.

do it' explains the infectiously energetic Wilson.

"And that's just the beginning of the insanity! Topping himself, Wilson performs running somersaults atop the 42-foot-long, two-foot-wide Pendulum of

Pandemonium! 'When I leap off, the jump is sometimes as much as 33-feet, because the wheel is moving away from me when I'm airborne,' says

Wilson of his favorite circus act, one which he hopes to transform into a circus tradition. 'When people think of the circus they think of the high wire, the trapeze, the animals and the human cannonball. I would like to think of the wheel in the same way, as something the audience comes to see.'"

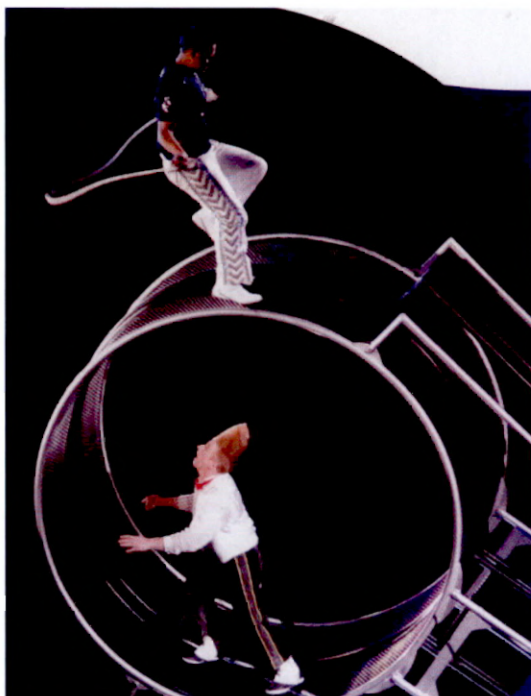
He turned somers-

saults in the ring and stood on top of the wheel covered with a lighted clock. His thrilling presentation was touted by the circus as the most daring ever presented.

In January 2008 Barry Philips

The Nock Family.

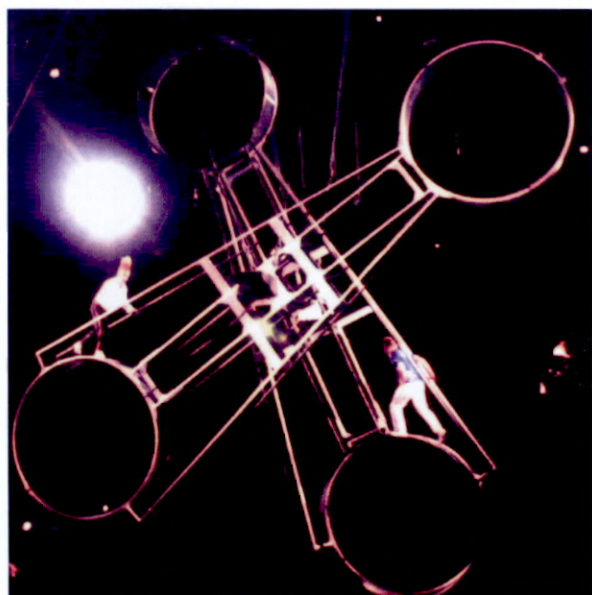




Bello Nock and Nicholas Wallenda in 2007.

wrote a review in *Circus Report* the 134th edition of the big show, saying, "Crazy' Wilson Dominguez has an expanded role in this year's show and is featured in the three major thrill acts. Returning on the 'Pendulum of Pandemonium,' Wilson closes the first half of the show on the wheel, jumping rope, and closing with a forward somersault."

Nock and Wallenda on the split wheel.



Dominguez was with Circus Krone in Germany in 2007. He was in the 2008 Monte Carlo Circus and received a Silver Clown award.

Hans Winn's space wheel appeared with Garden Bros. Circus in 2007. The Winn family also has a motorcycle on wire, a motorcycle globe and sway poles.

The Nerveless Nocks own three different a space wheels along with their sway pole act. The Flores family has a wheel, as does Jamie Garcia's Garcia Family Circus.

Bello Nock had long thought of presenting a daring two person space wheel act. He enlisted his friend Nikolas Wallenda, son of Delilah Wallenda, to help him plan the act. Together they designed and built a 39-foot double wheel that is suspended from the ceiling. The most difficult part of the design was the splitting of the wheels while still spinning. This was accomplished by pneumatic cylinders providing power for the separation. This newest innovation was presented on the big show in 2007.

Nock and Wallenda presented The Wheel of Steel, side-by-side wheels on the same axle, with a unique finish. Half way through the act the double wheel splits in half, with Nock on one and Wallenda on the other.

Cirque du Soleil presented a big wheel in Ka at the MGM Hotel in Las Vegas. Cirque introduced a double wheel in Kooza, the 2007 show. Jimmy Ibarra Zapata and Carlos Enrique Marin Loaiza worked the double Wheel of Death recklessly.

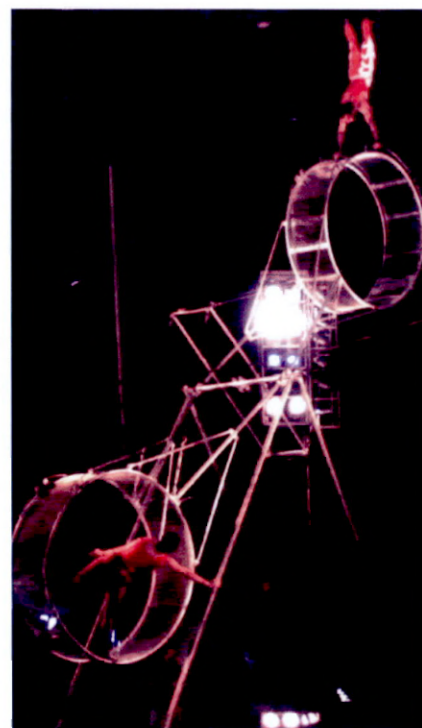
The Grenadero brothers from Portugal presented a space wheel at the Hippodrome Circus in Great Yarmouth, England in 2007. They had worked the wheel for fourteen years.

The flying trapeze performing Fernandez

brothers with their wives worked a double wheel on Carson & Barnes in 2008. The act was introduced as the Wheel of Destiny.

Others presenting space wheels are Agostino Maltese, Vinicio Vasquez. Vincente and Dionicia, and Manuel and Maritza Luna.

In 2007 space wheels appeared with Ringling-Barnum, Cole Bros., UniverSoul, Carson & Barnes, Kelly-Miller, Garcia Bros., Cirque du Soleil, Garden Bros., Bauer's Circus Maximus, Paul Kaye's Evansville Shrine, Alain Zerbini, Royal Hanneford, Circo Osorio/American Crown and Oscar Garcia's Star Family.



The Fernandez Family on Carson & Barnes. Fred Pfening photo.

My thanks to the Circus World Museum, and Leigh Heisinger for supplying dates and details for the early history. The Internet's You Tube web site has many excellent videos of wheel acts. One of Elvin Bale's pioneering act about 1970 and another of the Columbia Wheel of Death that features four performers in four cages are highlights. You Tube also has clips of other wheel acts not mentioned in this article.

This article was augmented by the editor.

Bill Woodcock's Circus Album

In the late 1950s we were on the West Coast with Rudi Jacobi's Rudy Bros. Circus. We would lay off at the World Jungle Compound at Thousand Oaks, California. I will never forget the first time I ever saw the place. I was walking all around when I came across this small lady practicing a small group of very large tigers.

Now you must remember this was well before Baumann, Gunther and Robert Baudy. All she had was a fan rake and was fussing at them like a grade school teacher I once had.

I was completely fascinated. Her control was exquisite. Up until that point all I had seen were fighting acts such as Clyde Beatty's. When their acts were completed and the chute door opened, a mad scramble ensued as the cats headed for the door, aided by a gallop from the band.

In this case the door opened and only one tiger reacted. He slightly turned his head that direction and when the school teacher went, "Tut! . . . Tut . . . Tut," his eyes went right back to her. They then exited in an orderly fashion one at a time.

I went back to the area where we kept our elephants and told my folks, "I just saw the damndest thing. They got this little old lady working these tigers and it was unbelievable!"

My dad asked, "Buckles, how old are you?" I told him, and he said, "And you never heard of Mabel Stark?" Of course I had, but I hadn't made the connection.

My friend Roger Smith told me that Mabel's theory about the fan rake was that it looked to the tigers like claws bigger than theirs. I felt there was something to this, since when she picked it up, her cats behaved. Roger also says that this photo probably wasn't taken at World Jungle Compound. He notes: "These appear to be road cages



behind her, and with her full uniform and younger appearance, this picture may have been taken during her Japanese tour of 1954 (when her husband Eddie Trees died) to 1957. The deal was that she would teach Japanese performers to work the act, then leave the tigers there. I have a shot of Frank Phillips assisting Mabel with this jump, and Eddie Trees working the outside."

The second picture appeared in

the 1938 Robbins Bros. Circus program. That season was probably the worst year in circus history. It was the last time Hagenbeck-Wallace and Al G. Barnes toured, and even the mighty Ringling show folding in June and had to regroup. Cole Bros. Circus owners Jess Adkins and Zack Terrell decided to take out a second unit that year and paid the price. The Cole show didn't finish the season, and such features as Clyde Beatty



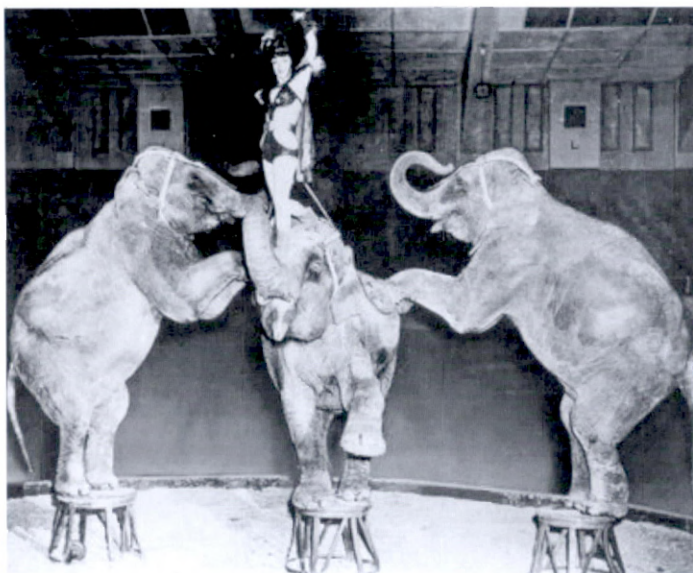
were moved to Robbins Bros. to finish out the tour.

This is a classic Depression era photo. Look at all the people watching the elephants being unloaded. Since it was free everybody could afford it. Old timers told me that it was common to have more people watch the unloading than buy tickets to the big show. This image is either Hagenbeck-Wallace or Ringling-Barnum in 1937 or earlier.

The next shot was taken in Terrell Jacobs's barn in Peru, Indiana, and shows his wife Dolly in practice with Judy, Modoc, and Empress. Around the time of this picture these three would run at the drop of a hat. Modoc took off in Peru and wandered around the countryside for a day or so. One morning a farmer awoke to see her standing in his field asleep. He approached her with a pitch fork and tried to chase her off, but got kicked around for his effort.

A friend recently sent me this account of the incident from the *Hammond (Indiana) Times* of November 15, 1942: "Harry Haag, manager of Fisher's elephants at Medora, Indiana and his elephant handler, Corena, arrived Saturday night at the Claude Krieg farms in Huntington County to assist Modoc's would-be capturers. Modoc broke for freedom on Wednesday in Wabash, Indiana. . . .

"Since Wednesday, when she made her break for freedom and tramped confusedly through the streets of Wabash, Ind., damaging a home and a drug store, she has been on the verge of capture many times. Friday, surrounded by farmers, she injured one of them, Kenneth Kindley, 38, when he tripped while running from her. Modoc rolled over him accidentally and physicians gave him a 50-50 chance to live. Terrell Jacobs, Modoc's owner and trainer, said he was



afraid her frequent baths in the Wabash and Salamonie Rivers would give her pneumonia. Farmers throughout the vicinity were afraid it wouldn't."

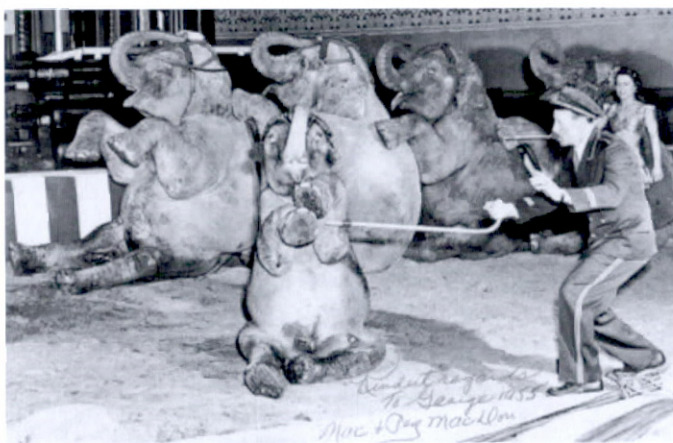
Later, when Dolly had the act booked with Stevens Bros. Circus they had the elephants trucked down town each morning in the small communities where my dad would unload them along with a tub and do a few tricks right on the main street. Afterward he would stand on the tub himself and explain to the local citizenry the marvels they would see at the circus. One such day while making the spiel he looked around to see the elephants, three abreast, heading back to the lot. A local farmer delivering produce in his truck quickly made a "U" turn in an attempt to out run them. Can you imagine, that poor guy had probably made that delivery for fifty years, and then have this happened out of the blue.

The last image shows the Tom

Packs elephants. They were the third act trained by Mack MacDonald. By chance these elephants arrived by ship in New Orleans during the 1948 Thanksgiving week Shrine Circus produced by the Tom Packs Circus. By that time my father was working the second act Mack broke, the Bailey Bros. (later the Carin Cristiani) elephants, and by happenstance he was presenting them at the New Orleans Shrine for Packs.

One day Jack Leontini, an executive on the Packs show, comes to my dad explaining that the elephants had arrived and they had to be brought to the building. Along with him was an Indian gentleman with a crisp British accent named Shondurandivan who had been overseeing their voyage from India. The elephants were unloaded and moved to the building, and now Mr. Leontini was looking for a trainer. Right away my dad recommended Mack, but for some reason he had gotten away from elephants and was now operating a Wild Life Show. After considerable effort, Mack was finally located and flown into New Orleans, but after seeing the punks he almost turned around and went back. They were skin and bones, infested with lice and internal parasites, and to make matters worse, the one later named Mary had one leg slightly shorter than the other three. She managed to navigate ok, but had a noticeable limp. Leontini and Mack finally made a deal, but it was with the understanding that the training be done in Florida. They ultimately decided on Capt. Heyer's place in Sarasota.

Doing the sitting long mount are, left to right, Alice, Jean, Mary and Penny. The elephant in front was named Tommy. That's Mack instructing Tommy while his wife Peggy, who recently passed away, stands over his right shoulder.





Sale of Fairground & Circus Vehicles, Posters and Related Ephemera.

The Collection of Peter Arnett.

The major part of the collection being vehicles from his travelling circus, all painted in his circus colours, including:



The original Tom Norman Palladium Show from 1930.



A Mortier 97 key organ, built in 1923.



A "Burton" living wagon with original carvings by Varney & Hutsby of Belper.

all the items pictured on this page plus a 1948 Mack Lorry with a rear crane and the original Mack petrol engine. L. H. D.; and 2 hand painted Sicillian wedding carts.

Together with a large collection of circus posters including early Bertram Mills, Billy Smart's Circus, Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey. Original caricatures by Tom Titt of Bertram Mill's Circus performers from the 1930s, mostly drawn for the *Tatler*. Circus programmes, Coco the Clown's suit and trumpet, and sundry other delights too numerous to mention.

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A 1963 Scammell "Goliath" truck with a Leyland 680 diesel engine.



A 1926 Aveling and Porter "Little Gem" Traction engine, dressed as a Showman's Engine.